

# RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Poet and Dramatist

BY

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*Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford*

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'The exchange of international thought is the only possible salvation of the world.'

THOMAS HARDY

'One may then laudably desire not to be counted a fool by wise men, nor a knave by good men, nor a fanatic by sober men. One may desire to show that the cause for which he has lived and laboured all the best years of his life is not so preposterous, intellectually and morally, as of late it has been made to appear by its noisier and more aggressive representatives; that he has never been duped by the sophistries and puerilities of its approved controversialists, but has rested on graver and worthier reasons, however ill-defined and ill-expressed; that even if his defence of it should have failed, he has not failed in courage or candour or sincerity; nor has he ever wittingly lent himself to the defence of folly or imposture.'

GEORGE TYRRELL,

...*Through Scylla and Charybdis*, viii.

TO

RANI AND PRASANTA MAHALANOBIS

Kindest and most unselfish of friends,  
courageous and steadfast through the  
years, loyal through all detractions and  
anger

## PREFACE

OVER twenty years ago, I published a short study, *Rabindranath Tagore*, then, in 1926, a quite different longer book, *Tagore, Poet and Dramatist*; both have long been out of print. It is the later book which is now brought up to date with the poet's death.

A book, as someone has observed, never completely shakes off its first draft, and my own opinions and critical judgements have changed very greatly. But rewriting has been drastic enough (some 35,000 words have been excised, and much added and changed) to make this in essentials a new examination, and a reasonably close representation of what I now feel. I have remembered always that Tagore (though his work, having to get past the concealment of an Indian language, came to judgement in the age of the First World War and of T. S. Eliot) as a writer was the contemporary of the later Tennyson and Browning and of Robert Bridges. In fairness, he must be judged as the Victorian poets are judged, whose world has passed away.

Milton's English verse is less than 18,000 lines. Tagore's published verse and dramas amount to 150,000 lines or their equivalent. His non-dramatic prose, novels, short stories, autobiography, criticism, essays of many kinds, is more than twice as much, and there is also a mass of uncollected material. I make no apology for omissions. Paper stocks are rationed, and the poet's Bengali admirers, who may feel disappointment that favourite pieces are not mentioned, must accept my assurance that I have cut down ruthlessly from necessity. I have also cut out my bibliography. I think mine was the first, but a bibliography



is of value chiefly to students of Bengali literature ; I have only 350 titles, and an inclusive list is in process of compilation. My own work is nearly finished, and I am able to do, not what a younger man might do but only what is still possible.

We ourselves know little of India, while Indians know a great deal about us and even about our inmost thought. Of what we have hardly cared to know, yet which many are at last anxious to know, there is evidence enough if we take some trouble. Gandhi's uniquely frank revelation of his 'experiments with truth'; Jawaharlal Nehru's *Autobiography*, which carries the impress of his candour and integrity; and Tagore's writings and public activities—if we know these, we are not likely to be surprised by events as they presently unfold. 'Norway breaking from thy hand, O King', answered Einar Tamberskelve at the Battle of Stiklestad, when Olaf turned inquiringly at the snapping of his bowstring. After the lapse of a millennium, the world heard a sound as full of meaning, from Singapore and Burma. There will be no restoration of the empire we have known. But there may well be a nobler and stronger reconstruction, with friendship and understanding, instead of dominion and subservience, as its solvents. The connexion of Britain and India stretches over more than three centuries, and provides the common ground on which East and West can come into a civilized relationship.

'John Keats', said his brother George, 'was no more like "Johnny Keats" than he "was like the Holy Ghost".' When Tagore's first English book appeared, and was seen to be mystical and religious, expectation was pleased. 'Oriental literature' was known to be like that; the West had made up its mind about 'the East', and a few stereotyped generalizations were applied to cover the most



diverse facts. Tagore, however, was not in the least like what he was supposed to be. He wrote, with a skill and virtuosity hardly ever equalled, in a tongue which is among the half-dozen most expressive and beautiful languages in the world, and the circumstances of his life afforded him leisure and opportunity, as well as ability, to observe the world outside India. I hope that my reader will see that his work was varied and vigorous and had more than a soft wistful charm, deadened by repetition; and that his spirit was brave and independent.

Finally, I have a debt to three persons: to Prasanta Mahalanobis, F.R.S., the final authority on all Tagore's work—his help, in letters and discussions, was generous beyond my power to express; to Noel Carrington, who examined in detail my book's earliest draft, to its great gain; and to my wife.

E.T.

Oriel College  
Oxford  
3 March 1946

#### PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*Edward Thompson died on 28 April, 1946 and was unable to read the proofs.*



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*BOOK I*

1861—1886

EARLY LIFE AND POETRY



## PROLEGOMENA

THE earliest Bengali literature takes us into a different world from the Hindu one of today. 'The Brahmanic influence was for centuries at a very low ebb',<sup>1</sup> and Buddhism reigned. Though long since replaced by Hinduism, Buddhism has clung tenaciously to the mind of the people and its influence still works, out of sight yet hardly out of sight. Fragments from an extensive literature which was Buddhist and magical and popular in character survive, some of them recovered from Nepal by Pandit Haraprasad Sastri; these are tentatively ascribed to the tenth or eleventh century. Almost as ancient are hymns discovered by Dr Dineshchandra Sen, which in language of the quaintest simplicity tell the adventures of their hero, the Sun-God, and express a wonder less imaginative but as real as that of the Dawn hymns of the *Rigveda* :

The Sun rises—how wonderfully coloured !  
 The Sun rises—the colour of fire !  
 The Sun rises—how wonderfully coloured !  
 The Sun rises—the colour of blood !  
 The Sun rises—how wonderfully coloured !  
 The Sun rises—the colour of betel-juice !

We are taken a stage beyond these 'pious ejaculations' by rhymed aphorisms ascribed to Dāk and Khanā, personages probably as historical as King Cole. These are the delight of the Bengali peasant today; and they 'are accepted as a guide by millions. The books serve as infallible agricultural manuals'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dineshchandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 19 and 21.

If rain falls at the end of Spring,  
Blessed land ! Blessed king !

Spring goes ;  
The heat grows.

Khanā says : Sow paddy seeds  
In sun ; but betel shelter needs.

About 1200 A.D., the political control of Bengal passed out of the hands of the Sen dynasty. A well-known picture by Surendranath Ganguli<sup>1</sup> shows Lakshman Sen, the last independent king of Nadiya, descending the *ghāt* to his boat with the painful steps of decrepit age, as he fled before the Musalman invaders. With him went into exile, till another handful of invaders gradually brought it back, the nationality of Bengal. Seven hundred years of foreign rule began, and Bengali thought and literature suffered not only because the newcomers were alien in race and religion but still more because of the disintegration resulting from faction and warring courts and the existence of little semi-independent states such as Vishnupur. Bengal was far from the centre of Musalman rule, and about 1340 its government became practically independent of Delhi, and continued so till 1576, when Akbar reconquered the province. During these two hundred years it was cut off from the life of the rest of India, and the people suffered from local oppressors whom its Musalman rulers were unable to control. The seventeenth century was a time of comparative prosperity ; but the eighteenth was the period of the decay of the Mogul Empire and the Maratha raids. Till the British rule was established, there was rarely any strong unifying Power, but a series of exacting disintegrating tyrannies, driving the people's life into corners and crannies. With no great pulse of national feeling throbbing and making the land proudly conscious that it was one, the village remained the unit.

Life was narrowed in other ways than political ; with the triumph of Hinduism over Buddhism, a process which was

<sup>1</sup> A Bengali artist who died in 1909, aged twenty-four.



probably completed about the time of the Musalman invasion of 1199, caste hardened and women's lot became circumscribed and veiled. Few countries produce so many poets and novelists as Bengal does. Yet, while the land and blood quicken imagination, for many centuries the life strangled it. The highest literature cannot live without a rich and varied community-life. Bengal produced an abundance of folk-poets; produced, too, court-poets, with gifts of diction and melody. The outward grace, the blossoming of style, was produced. But the tree did not come to fruit, for of a nation, as of an individual, it may be said that it can express itself well but has nothing to express.

Nearly two hundred years after the Musalman conquest of Bengal, Chandidas did for Bengali something of the service which Chaucer, his older contemporary,<sup>1</sup> did for English and Dante for Italian—that is, he gave it poetry which vindicated its claims against those of a supposedly more polished tongue. A Brahman priest of a village shrine, he fell in love with a woman of the washerman caste. He used the legend of the love of Krishna and Radha as the cloak of a passion which society regarded as monstrous, and expressed his own ardour and suffering in a great number of songs. This is not the place to discuss their value; but the poet's genius and his sincerity and depth of feeling set them apart in Bengali Vaishnava literature. He is often particularly happy in his opening lines, which leap out vividly, a picture full of life and feeling. This true lyrist was the fountain of what soon became a muddy monotonous stream, with only occasional gleaming ripples.

As Chaucer was followed by Lydgate, so Chandidas was followed and to some extent imitated by a younger contemporary, Vidyapati, who wrote in Maithili, a dialect of Bihar. Vidyapati's songs have been naturalized in Bengal and more imitated than even Chandidas's. The Vaishnava tradition was revived a century later by poets who followed in the track of the great religious revival of Chaitanya (early sixteenth century), and there has never been a time

<sup>1</sup> Chandidas was born about 1380 A.D.

when Vaishnava poems have not been produced in every village of Bengal. Inevitably, out of such an enormous mass of verse some is good, though to the Western reader it seems a never-pausing chatter about flutes and veils and dark-blue garments and jingling anklets.

Musalman rule influenced Bengali literature, by encouraging translation of the Sanskrit epics, which translation the pandits held to be sacrilege. 'If a person hears the stories of the eighteen *Purānas* or of the *Rāmāyana* recited in Bengali, he will be thrown into Hell', says a Sanskrit couplet. Musalman rule was indirectly responsible, too, for the epic *Chandi*, written towards the end of the sixteenth century by Mukundaram, a poor man who suffered from Musalman oppression and wrote out of his sense of outrage and helplessness.

In the eighteenth century, the Rajas of Nadiya drew to their court two renowned poets, Bharatchandra Ray, who perfected the elaborate ingenious style, and Ramprasad Sen, the greatest of all Bengali folk-poets, whose *sāktia* songs are often of ineffable charm and pathos.<sup>1</sup> But the close of the eighteenth century found poetry exhausted, with nothing to say and no new way of saying it. As the gap between the English Romantic poets and Tennyson and Browning is bridged by Beddoes, so the far wider gap between the vernacular Bengali poets of the eighteenth century and those of the new English influence whom we shall consider presently, is filled by the *kaviwallas*—'poet-fellows'—who went from place to place singly or in parties and did the work of the old English miracle-play and the modern music-hall. At their frequent worst, they were scurrilous and obscene; at their best, they continued the tradition of Chandidas and Ramprasad, as Beddoes that of the Elizabethans and Shelley. Their characteristics mark the work of Iswarchandra Gupta and Ramnidhi Gupta also, contemporaries who were not *kaviwallas*. It should be noted that, up to this date, Bengali literature means poetry, for prose hardly existed.

<sup>1</sup> See *Bengali Religious Lyrics*, by Edward Thompson and A. M. Spencer (Oxford University Press).



It was from the West that the new life came. In 1799, William Carey, Baptist missionary, settled at Serampur;<sup>1</sup> he found a welcome here, in Danish territory, at a time when missionary effort was excluded from districts under the East India Company's control. For over forty years he laboured to bring every kind of enlightenment, getting invaluable assistance from gifted colleagues. He introduced printing; and from the Serampur literature, chiefly translations and books which imparted information, modern Bengali prose began.

But real literary achievement did not fall to Carey. What foreigners, and pandits working under their direction, could hardly be expected to accomplish was achieved by a Bengali of genius, Rammohan Roy, who was born in 1774. He showed his individuality early; at the age of sixteen he composed an essay against idolatry, which led to 'a coolness between me and immediate kindred'. He travelled in India, returning home four years after writing this essay. Already a competent scholar in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic, and learned in Hindu law, religion and literature, he now added English, Greek and Hebrew to his accomplishments, that he might read the Bible, and he made European acquaintances. He opposed idolatry and social abuses, his attacks on widow-burning being especially determined; and his attitude 'raised such a feeling against me that I was at last deserted by every person except two or three Scotch friends, to whom and the nation to which they belong I will always feel grateful'. In 1820 he published *The Precepts of Jesus the Guide to Peace and Happiness*. He accepted Christ's pre-existence and super-angelic dignity, but not his divinity. A controversy followed between him and Dr Marshman of Serampur; and in 1829, the Unitarian Society of England reprinted his *Precepts*, with his replies to Dr Marshman, the *First* and *Second* and *Final Appeals to the Christian Public in Defence of the Precepts of Jesus*. He had already gathered a small band of Bengalis, theistically-minded like himself,

<sup>1</sup> He landed in Bengal in 1794, and for several years was an indigo-planter.

who held informal meetings, the nucleus of the Brahmo Samaj. In 1830 he visited England, apparently one of the first Hindus to do this. Here he impressed everyone, and made many friendships: and the Select Committee of the House of Commons examined him on Indian affairs. Lord William Bentinck had suppressed suttee the previous year, an action for which Rammohan Roy's denunciations had prepared the way; and though the latter hesitated as to its expediency he supported Bentinck's action so effectively in England that the appeal against it was rejected. He died in Bristol on 27th September, 1833; it is pleasant for an Englishman to remember that his last days were surrounded by the most devoted care, everything that love could suggest being done to save his life.

It is hard to speak soberly of Rammohan Roy. In the crowded years that followed on his death, his influence was present in every progressive movement, religious, political, social, or literary. His least claim to greatness is that he was the first writer of good Bengali prose. 'His prose', said Rabindranath, 'is very lucid, especially when we consider what abstruse subjects he handled. Prose style was not formed, and he had to explain to his readers that the nominative precedes the verb, and so on.' But in speaking of Rammohan Roy we forget his literary achievement. He stood alone, with the most homogeneous society ever known united against him, he broke the tradition of ages and crossed 'the black water'. Throughout his search for God he remembered men, feeling for sorrows that were not his and labouring till gigantic evils were ended or at least exposed.

After Rammohan Roy's death, the Brahmo Samaj was kept alive chiefly by the exertions of Dwarkanath Tagore, the poet's grandfather. He, too, was one of the first Hindus to visit England, where he was greatly honoured, as 'Prince Dwarkanath Tagore'. He left a tradition of magnificence, of wealth and prodigal expenditure, and many debts, which his son discharged.



Two streams of movement now flowed vigorously but diversely, yet throwing across connecting arms and from time to time converging: the religious and the literary. Neither can be neglected in our present study, though both can be indicated in outline only. The Hindu College (now the Presidency College, Calcutta) founded in 1816 by Rammohan Roy and David Hare, a watchmaker, in the decades preceding and following the Raja's<sup>1</sup> death was the centre of intellectual life. It found two remarkable teachers, Dr Richardson and Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. The latter was the son of a Portuguese in a good mercantile position, and an Indian mother. His life may be swiftly summed up: born 10th August, 1809, he joined the staff of the Hindu College in November 1826, where he immediately became the master-spirit; he was attacked and forced to resign; he started a daily paper, the *East Indian*; he died of cholera, 23rd December, 1831. Round him gathered a band of students among whom were found names destined to become distinguished in the next twenty years. They showed an emancipation of mind which often found expression in reckless wildness. They revelled in shocking the prejudices of the orthodox; they would throw beef-bones into Hindu houses and openly buy from the Musalman breadseller, and go round shouting in at the doors of pandits and Brahmans: 'We have eaten Musalman bread'. A prominent member of the group, who in after years reverted to a rather conservative position, shocked society by the public announcement of his intention to become a Moslem, a farce which he crowned by a mock ceremony of apostasy. These excesses cannot be charged to Derozio's teaching or example; the new wine was heady and came in over-abundant measure. His attitude was summed up in his noble defence when his enemies compelled his dismissal. 'Entrusted as I was for some time with the education of youths peculiarly circumstanced; was it for me to have made them pert and ignorant dogmatists by permitting them to know what could be said

<sup>1</sup> The title was given to Rammohan Roy by the Mogul Emperor.

upon only one side of grave questions ? . . . I never teach such absurdity.' His was a singularly sunny nature. 'No frown ever darkened his brow, no harsh or rude word ever escaped his lips.' He taught manliness and virtue, and that his pupils should think for themselves.

Derozio's school cared nothing for nationalism. On the contrary, everything Indian was despised. The one fact to which they were awake was that at last intellectual freedom had come ; compared with this, nothing else mattered. The French Revolution, at a distance of forty years, fired them ; European literature inspired and taught them. Unfortunately, with emancipation of mind too often went faults not merely of manners, but of morality, which strengthened the reaction against them. But at first the Derozio group, the intellectual successors of Rammohan Roy, ruled in literature and journalism, showing great activity in social reform.

On the religious side, the stream of Rammohan Roy's influence ran in other channels. At first the Brahmo Samaj was dormant. In 1845, Dr Alexander Duff, who had founded what became later the Scottish Churches College, the beginnings of missionary educational work, startled Hindu Calcutta by a series of remarkable conversions. His converts were young men eminent not only for family, but, as their after-career showed, for ability and character. One was Lalbihari De, whose *Folk Tales of Bengal* and *Bengal Peasant Life* are still read ; another was Kalicharan Banerji, for many years Registrar of Calcutta University, one of the founders of the Indian National Congress and a man universally respected. Some of the Derozio group, also, had swung over from their position of extreme secularism, to Christianity. In 1833, Krishnamohan Banerji was baptized, passing over to Christianity from an attitude whose only contact with religion was contempt for orthodox Hinduism. Through a long life he served his country as a Christian minister, revered for his character and his scholarship and his considerable literary gifts. A greater accession still was the greatest poet Bengal had so far produced, known by his Christian



name henceforth, Michael Madhusudhan Datta or Dutt.<sup>1</sup> Hinduism was alarmed, as Anglican England, a few years later, was alarmed by the secessions to Rome which followed in Newman's wake. The tide of conversion was stemmed by Debendranath Tagore, the poet's father, son of Rammohan Roy's friend Dwarkanath Tagore. In his *Autobiography*,<sup>2</sup> he tells of his alarm and anger.

'Wait a bit, I am going to put a stop to this.' So saying, I was up. I immediately set Akshay Kumar Datta's pen in motion, and a spirited article appeared in the *Tatwabodhini Patrikā* . . . after that I went about in a carriage every day from morning till evening to all the leading and distinguished men in Calcutta, and entreated them to adopt measures by which Hindu children would no longer have to attend missionary schools and might be educated in schools of our own. . . . They were all fired by my enthusiasm.

In this glimpse of the father some of the famous son's traits show—his eagerness, his gift for propaganda. Brahmo schools were started, and the Samaj was stirred into activity and reorganized.

The next twenty years were the great years of the Brahmo Samaj. The chief thing to note about these years is the solidarity of Bengali intellectual life. Though the ways and attitude of what I have called the Derozio group repelled Debendranath Tagore, and though his religious enthusiasm, especially his Hinduism, met with little sympathy from them, yet between the two schools there was friendly intercourse. From 1845 onwards the Derozio stream began to flow into the other. Nationalism awoke, and with it swelled the full tide of an enthusiastic intellectual life. During the twenty years following on Duff's sensational success, Bengal was filled with a pulsing, almost seething eagerness. It was into this ferment that Rabindranath Tagore was born, at the very centre of its activities, on the crest of these energetic years.

Debendranath Tagore firmly established the Brahmo Samaj, and worked untiringly on its behalf. A theist of

<sup>1</sup> He was baptized in 1843. Michael (1824-73) was not one of Duff's converts.

<sup>2</sup> English translation, pp. 98-9.

the most uncompromising sort, he withstood idolatry even in his own family, with ever increasing opposition. In later years he grew more in general sympathy with orthodox Hinduism, withdrew from society and lived much in solitary meditation, receiving from his countrymen the title *Maharshi*, 'Great Rishi'.<sup>1</sup> But, though frequent assertions to the contrary have been made, he never strayed from the Brahmo position as regards such a typically Hindu belief as transmigration. 'My father never believed in that fairy-tale', said his son.<sup>2</sup> He was staunch also as regards the necessity for social reform.

Debendranath Tagore's religious conservatism influenced strongly all his sons, Rabindranath not least. Yet it is well to notice how much there was in the Maharshi's religion which was a new interpretation of Hinduism. His thorough-going theism, hating all idolatry and scorning to compromise with it or explain it away, is like nothing before it. Many Hindus, especially poets, have denounced idolatry. But this man gave his life to the firm establishment of a society whose basis is the fervid denial of it. Rabindranath's theism was of the same clear unequivocal kind.

A few remarks on the relationship between orthodox Hindu society and the Tagores will be in place here. The family are *Pirili*<sup>3</sup> Brahmans; that is, outcastes, as having supposedly eaten with Musalmans in a former day. No strictly orthodox Brahman would either eat or inter-marry with them. Thus, they have no real place in the orthodox Brahman organization. 'Apart from their great position as zemindars and leaders of culture', a friend writes, 'from a strictly social point of view the Tagores would be looked down upon with a certain contempt as *pirilis*'.

<sup>1</sup> 'Sage.'

<sup>2</sup> Conversation with Dr J. N. Farquhar.

<sup>3</sup> (Persian) *pir + ali*. A *pir* is a saint: 'chief saint'; the word is a somewhat sarcastic one, hard to translate. The tension of the two chief communities in Bengal is a matter of quite recent times. Rabindranath was very proud of Islam's contribution to Indian culture, of which he considered it an integral part; and Rammohan Roy was willing to serve in England as the Mogul Emperor's representative, and was much influenced by Moslem thought.



The irony of the situation is their outstanding influence despite this, in everything that matters. The family name is Banerji (Bandopādhyāya). But *Thākur* ('Lord') is a common mode of addressing Brahmans, and was used by the early British officials for any Brahman in their service. Anglicized as Tagore, it was taken over by this great family as their surname.

Though outcastes from orthodox Hinduism, within what we may style the Brahmo Samaj circle, which embraced many who were not members of the Samaj, they stood for all that had affinities with orthodox Hinduism. The family, except for the Maharshi's immediate circle, was much more orthodox in ceremonial than the advanced Brahmo groups. Readers of the Maharshi's *Autobiography* will remember his stand against idolatrous ritual in his own family. In caste also, the Brahmo Tagores,<sup>1</sup> though not supporters of it, in practice adhered to it. The friend already quoted suggested to me that the difference is analogous to that between Anglican High and Low. 'As regards religious principles, there is absolutely no difference between them and ourselves (I write as a member of the *Sādhārān*<sup>2</sup> Brahmo Samaj) while monotheism is even now obnoxious to most of the orthodox Hindus. *Adi*<sup>3</sup> Samaj is High, that is all, while we are Low.'

The Maharshi's branch of the Tagores followed his lead against all idolatrous practices of any sort; and the poet, going farther, became an uncompromising foe to caste and to division between one Brahmo sect and another.

In 1857 Keshabchandra Sen joined the Brahmo Samaj. His vigour and magnetic powers of persuasion made the Samaj a greater force than ever, the most dominating thing in Bengali thought for the next fifteen years. Yet with his ministry the seeds of schism, which have since brought forth so plentiful a crop, were sown. As is well known, his mind was deeply influenced by Christianity. The more conservative section murmured, and it was only the Maharshi's affection for his iconoclastic colleague that kept

<sup>1</sup> One section of the Tagores are still Hindus. This paragraph does not include them.

<sup>2</sup> 'Common' or 'Catholic'.

<sup>3</sup> 'Primitive.'

Keshab so long in the parent society. Under the influence of Akshaykumar Datta, their most influential journalist, the other wing of the Samaj was swinging to the extreme limit of Brahmo orthodoxy, where it became scarcely distinguishable from Hinduism. In 1866 Keshab's party seceded, and became the *Bhāratavarshiya<sup>1</sup> Brāhmo Samāj<sup>2</sup>*, later known as *The Church of the New Dispensation*, the parent body taking the name of *Ādi Brāhmo Samāj*.

Keshab founded *Sulabh-Samāchār<sup>3</sup>*, the first popular newspaper in Bengali, thereby introducing cheap journalism into his land. Nevertheless, the bent of his mind was neither literary nor political. His direct influence on Rabindranath was not great, but his figure was so important during these formative years that his career cannot altogether be passed over. Without him the poet must have been born into a poorer heritage of thought and emotion. The history of Keshab's later years is well-known, and does not concern us.

Some of the Derozio group definitely joined the Brahmo Samaj. Others fell under the sway of Positivist thought, which was influential in Bengal. But all remained on friendly terms with the Brahmo leaders. About 1866, the character of the Brahmo Samaj's impact on Bengali life and thought began to change. At first it did not become less, but it became more general, tingeing the thought of Hindus rather than attracting them to join the Samaj. Today, the Samaj's actual membership is very small. For many years, however, its three main societies presented perhaps the most notable spectacle the world has seen since medieval times in Italy, of a constellation of ability, in many members brilliant to the point of genius, yet forming an eclectic withdrawn brightness. To the interested Englishman it sometimes seems as if every name which counted in Bengal belonged to these tiny communities. Yet the main life of Bengal, apart from art, swept by, scarcely influenced.

<sup>1</sup> 'Indian.'

<sup>2</sup> There was later yet another secession, a third Brahmo Samaj; the *Sādbāran Brāhmo Samāj*, which became much the largest body.

<sup>3</sup> 'Cheap News.'



The period 1860-80 was one of expansion and feverish activity. It was the full tide of the Bengali Renaissance, standing in matters literary to the age of Rammohan Roy as our own age of Marlowe and the University Wits stood to the period of Sackville, Wyatt and Surrey. Michael Dutt, in his *Tilottama-sambhava*, introduced blank verse, and the success of his epic, the *Meghnādbadhkāvya*, established it. It became the accepted medium for serious poetical drama, till prose superseded it. Michael also introduced the sonnet, an alien which made itself at home.

It would be fanciful to find the fact that he was a Christian mirrored in his choice of a hero for his epic, whose hero is not Rama, though the story is taken from the *Rāmāyana*, but Meghnad, son of Rama's foe, the demon-king Ravana. But his attitude is summed up in his own terse statement, in which we hear again the frank revolt of the Derozio school: 'I hate Rama and his rabble. Ravana was a fine chap'. Probably, since Milton was his model, he was remembering Satan, so often alleged to be the hero of *Paradise Lost*. 'Though, as a jolly Christian youth, I don't care a pin's head for Hinduism, I love the grand mythology of our ancestors.' It says a great deal for the easy-going tolerance of Bengali opinion that a poet expressing such sentiments, and choosing the pariahs of Hindu mythology as his demigods, should have been taken into the hearts of his countrymen. Bengal has travelled far from the standpoint of the more orthodox South. It has a good deal even of free-thinking, using the word in its restricted vulgar sense, to signify thought which is definitely negative in its religious conclusions.

Michael began with English verse, writing a long romance in the manner of Scott, *The Captive Ladie*. This is fluent and worthless. But in the *Meghnādbadh* he was happily inspired to trust his native tongue. Milton was his master and he attained some of Milton's majesty and splendour of elaborate diction and noble metrical movement. Rabindranath, when aged seventeen, the young Apollo,

'though young, intolerably severe',

cut the *Meghnādbadh* to pieces. Experience later showed him how much Michael stands out above his contemporaries and successors, and for this criticism he was remorseful. Michael's diction was a sanskritized one so remote from spoken Bengali as to be difficult for all but good scholars. He used it with the insight of genius and with such feeling for majestic words as Francis Thompson showed, but with none of a philologist's exactness. 'He was nothing of a Bengali scholar', said Rabindranath once, when we were discussing the *Meghnādbadh*; 'he just got a dictionary and looked out all the sounding words. He had great power over words. But his style has not been repeated. It isn't Bengali.' He keeps an almost unbounded popularity, and there can be very few among Bengal's thousands of annual prize-givings where a recitation from his chief poem is not on the programme.

When Michael was the 'Bengali Milton'—for it was the custom to equate each writer of note with some English name—Nabinchandra Sen, with his aristocratic clear-cut features and haughty air, was 'the Byron'. His ambitious temperament revealed itself in the subjects he chose. His *Raivataka*, an epic in twenty books, aimed at throwing round the mythology of Hinduism, already deeply tinged with decay by contact with the modern spirit, the protecting shadow of imagination. He summoned up all the magnificence of ancient legend.

A dim prehistoric vista—a hundred surging peoples and mighty kingdoms, in that dim light, clashing and warring with one another like emblematic dragons and crocodiles and griffins on some African shore—a dark polytheistic creed and inhuman polytheistic rites—the astute Brahman priest, fomenting eternal disunion by planting distinctions of caste, of creed, and of political government on the basis of Vedic revelation—the lawless brutality of the tall blonde Aryan towards the primitive, dark-skinned scrub-nosed children of the soil—the Kshatriya's star, like a huge comet brandished in the political sky, casting a pale glimmer over the land—the wily Brahman priests, jealous of the Kshatriya ascendancy, entering into an unholy compact with the non-Aryan Naga and Dasyu hordes, and adopting into the Hindu Pantheon the Asuric gods of the latter,



the trident-bearing Mahadeo, with troops of demons fleeing at his beck, or that frenzied goddess of war, the hideous Kali, with her necklace of skulls—the non-Aryan Nagas and Dasyns crouching in the hilly jungles and dens like the fell beasts of prey, and in the foreground the figure of the half-divine legislator Krishna, whom Vishnu, the Lord of the Universe, guides through mysterious visions and phantasms.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Dr Seal. Yet the same critic adds that, while the ten best books of this colossal attempt deserve to live,

the *Raivataka*, in twenty books, is a work which can arouse only indignation, we had almost said contempt, for who can read books like the eleventh or the eighteenth without a gnashing of the teeth, or an instinctive curl of the lip?

In the revival of Hinduism, which came as a reaction from Western influence, Nabin Sen was prominent, the poet of the movement. In his *Battle of Plassey* he sought to arrest disintegration by appeal to patriotic emotion.

Other poets were busy in Rabindranath's childhood. Hemchandra Banerji ranks with Nabinchandra Sen; they are the two chief names of this movement, next to Michael. Hem Babu introduced the patriotic note, possibly a greater political service than literary. His *Song of India* keeps popularity, and is no worse, as poetry, than *Rule, Britannia*. His epics have reputation, but I am assured that those who praise them most have read them least. His gods and demons are very often and very easily 'astonished', and are always 'roaring'; and their 'chariots' 'run' through the sky. His vocabulary is very limited; everything is 'unparalleled'. His description is overdone, and never gets forward; it keeps on turning back upon itself. Rabindranath, when I put this view of Hem's work before him, agreed with alacrity and asperity, and referred me to Beattie and Akenside for English parallels. Neither Hem nor Nabin ever really touched Rabindranath, and they can therefore be crowded out in a racing survey of the influences that have formed the poet. More important to us is Biharilal Chakravarti, a nearly forgotten poet but a

<sup>1</sup> *New Essays in Criticism*, pp. 96-7.

true one. Rabindranath has told' how Biharilal's simple music attracted him, when in his teens.

If this chapter aimed at giving a complete survey of all Bengali literary effort, it would contain considerable mention of Akshaykumar Datta's prose work, long a model of style; and a far more extended notice of that of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, who took up Bengali prose from the hands of Rammohan Roy. Vidyasagar translated, and wrote didactic and moral treatises, in a sober adequate style. His courage and honesty, his learning and generosity, gave him almost a dictatorship in letters. Then Bankimchandra Chatterji, 'the Scott of Bengal', swiftly made his way to the acknowledged headship of Bengali literature. To his popularity let Rabindranath bear witness:<sup>1</sup>

Then came Bankim's *Bangadarsan*,<sup>2</sup> taking the Bengali heart by storm. It was bad enough to have to wait till the next monthly number was out, but to be kept waiting further till my elders had done with it was simply intolerable! Now he who will may swallow at a mouthful the whole of *Chandrasekhar* or *Bisbabriksha*, but the process of longing and anticipating, month after month; of spreading over the long intervals the concentrated joy of each short reading, revolving every instalment over and over in the mind while watching and waiting for the next; the combination of satisfaction with unsatisfied craving, of burning curiosity with its appeasement: these long-drawn-out delights of going through the original serial none will ever taste again.

*Bangadarsan* was a brilliant transplanting of the Western miscellaneous monthly to Indian soil, and by it Bankim showed himself a pioneer in journalism no less than in fiction. Only *Sādhana*, the magazine afterwards associated with Rabindranath's most prolific period, has surpassed it in literary quality and popular appeal. Bankim was a man of genius and abundant versatile force; and had he always written on his best level of truth and achievement, there could be no fear for his fame. Unfortunately, he

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, pp. 114, 131 seq., 202.

<sup>2</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> 'Bengal Review.' *Darsan* means 'spectacle'.



drifted into the neo-Hindu movement which pressed into service, for the rehabilitation of superstition and folly, grotesque perversions of Western science and philosophy. Popular Hinduism contained no legend too silly, no social practice too degraded, to find support. Any fiction, however wild, was twisted into a 'proof' that the discoveries of modern science were known to our 'forefathers'. If a god careered the skies in a self-moving car, behold the twentieth-century aeroplane and steam-propelled car, both known thousands of years ago, in those wonderful primitive times. Though Bankim was never an extreme neo-Hindu, his name gave the movement an importance it could not have had otherwise, and his work became propaganda. Part of this movement was taken up by Ramkrishna Paramhansa, the ascetic, whom Max Müller has made familiar to Western readers, and by his disciple Vivekananda, whose advocacy gave reaction great vogue. The growing spirit of nationalism kept the tide running strongly.

In no other family than that of the Tagores could all the varied impulses of the time have been felt so strongly and fully. These impulses had come from many men. Rammohan Roy had flung open doors; Derozio and others had thrown windows wide; Keshab came and intellectual and religious horizons were broadened. The tide of reaction had been set flowing by the neo-Hindu school, in battle with whom the poet was to find his strength of polemical prose, his powers of sarcasm and ridicule; and poets and prose-writers had established new forms, and given freedom to old ones. Rabindranath was fortunate in the date of his coming.

## EARLY DAYS

RABINDRANATH TAGORE was born in Calcutta on the 6th of May, 1861. If he was fortunate in the time of his birth, when such a flowering season lay before his native tongue, in his family he had a gift which cannot be over-estimated. He was born a Tagore; that is, he was born into the one family in which he could experience the national life at its very fullest and freest. He was born into that great rambling mansion at Jorasanko, in the heart of Calcutta's teeming life. The house has grown as the whims or needs of successive Tagores have dictated, rambling and wandering round its court-yards, till it has become a tangle of building. If other houses may be thought of as having a soul of their own, this must have such an over-soul as belongs to the congregated life of ants and bees. If society be desired, it is always at hand; and the Hindu joint-family system, when established on such a scale and with such opulence as here, sets about each member a mimic world, as vigorous as the world without and far closer. Yet for solitude, for the meditation of sage or the ecstatic absorption of child, there are corners and nooks and rooms. In the poet's *Reminiscences*, we see a child watching the strange pageant of older folk and their solemn difficult ways. His father, the Maharshi, was usually absent, wandering abroad; the poet, the youngest of seven sons, was left by his mother's death to the care of servants. Of these servants he has given us a humorous picture, not untouched with malice.

In the history of India the régime of the Slave Dynasty was not a happy one.<sup>1</sup>

For most of us the sorrows of childhood keep a peculiar bitterness to the end, but the needs of life suppress the

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 24.



memory. Though they were keenly felt, one does not gather that the poet's sorrows were unusual, in number or quality. His first experiences of school distressed him; but he escaped the ordinary routine of Indian school life, and his education was desultory. One thinks of Wordsworth's steadfast refusal to do any work other than as the Muse commanded. 'He wrote his *Ode to Duty*', said a friend, 'and there was an end of that matter.' Similarly Rabindranath declined to be 'educated'. Even when his fame was long established, a Calcutta journal demurred to the suggestion that he should be an examiner—in the matriculation, of all examinations—on the ground that he was 'not a Bengali scholar'.

First, the rambling house in Calcutta, the infinite leisure of days not troubled with much school. Then came gardens and river. An outbreak of infectious fever caused him to be taken outside the city, to a riverside residence. Here came a life fresher, more ecstatic than any before :

Every day there was the ebb and flow of the tide on the Ganges ; the various gait of so many different boats ; the shifting of the shadows of the trees from west to east ; and, over the fringe of shade-patches of the woods on the opposite bank, the gush of golden life-blood through the pierced breast of the evening sky. Some days would be cloudy from early morning ; the opposite woods black ; black shadows moving over the river. Then with a rush would come the vociferous rain, blotting out the horizon ; the dim line of the other bank taking its leave in tears : the river swelling with suppressed heavings ; and the moist wind making free with the foliage of the trees overhead.<sup>1</sup>

He returned to Calcutta, having received the freedom of the fields. Henceforward, as stray lines from the *Gita Govinda*<sup>2</sup> or the *Cloud-Messenger*<sup>3</sup> fell on the child's hearing, imagination could take of the things that had been seen and by them conjure up the Sanskrit poet's picture. He had begun to write verse himself, and before long his father, who had been watching, as he watched all things,

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>2</sup> By Jayadeva (12th century).

<sup>3</sup> Kalidasa's famous poem.

in that silent aloof fashion of his, took him into that wider world beyond Calcutta. He was now to know his native land, a land of very clear and lovely beauty.

There are two Bengals, nowise like each other. There is Bengal of the Ganges, a land of vast slow-moving rivers, great reed-beds and mud-banks, where the population is almost amphibious. Right in the heart of this region is Nadiya, seat of the old Sen kingdom : a place which is Bengal of the Bengalis, legendary, haunted with memories of their vanished independence, sacred as a place where a God or Hero was last shown on earth. Here you find the purest Bengali spoken ; it is the place where poets have lived and sung. In after-days, Rabindranath had a home in the very thicket of the reeds and rivers, at Shileida.

The influence of his sojourn here in earliest manhood cannot be over-estimated ; it is of the very texture of his poems and short stories. But it was the other Bengal to which he was introduced first. His father brought him for a short stay at Bolpur, the place which is for ever associated with the poet's fame, because of the school which he established there. This Bengal is a dry uplifted country. The villages are scattered, and there are great spaces of jungle. The landscape of the jungle is of quiet loveliness, such as wins a man slowly yet for ever. At first sight it is disappointing. There are few great trees, and absolutely nothing of the savage luxuriance of a Burmese rattan-chained sky-towering forest or of the ever-climbing dripping might of Himalayan woods ; the one good timber tree, the *sāl*, is polled and cut away by the people for fuel. The mass of the jungle is a shrub, rarely ten feet high, called *kurchi* ; bright green, with milky juice and sweet white flowers. Intermixed with this are thorns ; zizyphs<sup>1</sup> and pink-blossomed mimosas. The soil is poor and hard. Where there is a tank, you have a tall *simul* (silk-cotton tree), lifting in spring a scarlet head of trumpet-shaped flowers ; or a wild mango. Often the soil cracks into nullas, fringed with crackling zizyph, or crowded with

<sup>1</sup> Called in Bengali *Kul*, wild plum : a plant common in Palestine and Syria also.



*palās* trees. These last, and *simul*, furnish in spring the only *masses* of wild flowers. Loken Palit<sup>1</sup> told me that what he missed, on return from England to India, was our profusion; our hedges crammed with shining beauty, our glades and meadows; after blackthorn, the ponds netted with crowfoot, the water-violets and kingcups and lady-smocks, the riot of gorse and may and wild rose, avenues of chestnut, the undergrowth of stitchworts, the sheets of primroses, violets, anemones, cowslips and bluebells; and, when summer is ending, heaths and heather and 'bramble-roses pleached deep'.<sup>2</sup> Rabindranath himself has spoken to me of this variety in landscape, and also of the beauty of autumn foliage in England. Instead, in Bengal we have only *simul* and *palās*. *Palās* flowers before the leaves come; twisted ungainly trees, holding up walls of leguminous, red flowers, which the Emperor Jahangir thought 'so beautiful that one cannot take one's eyes off them'. After these, before the spring quite shrivels in the summer heats, *nim* and *sāl* blossom; but their flowers, though exquisitely scented, make no show, being pale green-white and very small.

But the jungle has a peaceful charm which even the great forests cannot surpass. At evening, seek out one of the rare groves of tall trees—possibly preserved as a sacred grove, and with multitudes of crude clay horses round their bases, that the *thākur*<sup>3</sup> may ride abroad—or plunge deep into the whispering wilderness. Wait as the sun sinks, as the leaves awaken. Through the trees you see the evening quietness touching all life. You are not alone, for many scores of eyes are watching you; but of them you catch no glimpse, unless a jackal slinks by or a tiny flock of screaming parrots races overhead. In the distance, the cattle are coming back to the village, the buffaloes are lazily and unwillingly climbing out of the tank. It is 'cow-dust',<sup>4</sup> the Greek 'ox-loosing time'.

Or make your way to the open spaces, where only

<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath's friend and associate in youth and early manhood.

<sup>2</sup> Tennyson's *Dirge*.

have seen.

<sup>3</sup> 'Lord'—the same word as *Tagore*, as we

<sup>4</sup> A common Bengali name for evening.



stunted zizyphs grow. Look around on the stretching plain, to the horizon and its quiet lights. Seek out the jungle villages, the primitive life which finds a tank, a mango-grove, and a few rice-fields sufficient for its needs. And you will find the landscape by its very simplicity has taken your heart. In his *Banga-Lakshmi*,<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath has personified this attractive land :

In your fields, by your rivers, in your thousand homes set deep in mango-groves, in your pastures whence the sound of milking rises, in shadow of the banyans, in the twelve temples beside Ganges, O ever-gracious Lakshmi, O Bengal my Mother, you go about your endless tasks day and night with smiling face.

In this world of men, you are unaware that your sons are idle. You alone ! By the sleeping head you alone, O Mother, my Motherland, move wakeful, night and day, in your never-ending toil. Dawn by dawn you open flowers for worship. At noon, with your outspread skirt of leaves you ward off the sun. With night your rivers, singing the land to rest, enfold the tired hamlets with their hundred arms. Today, in this autumn noon, taking brief leisure in your sacred labour, you are sitting amid the trembling flowers, in this still hour of murmuring doves, a silent joy shining on your lips. Your loving eyes dispense abroad pardon and blessing, with patient, peaceful looks. Gazing at that picture, of self drowned and forgotten in love, gracious, calm, unspeaking, the poet bows his head and tears fill his eyes.

These are idealized pictures, and in them, as in all passionate love of a land, human joys and sorrows have thrown a sanctifying light on the outward face of meadow and forest. But the land itself, where factory and mine have left it unspoiled, justifies its children's affection.

Rabindranath's stay at Bolpur was brief. His father, as has been said, was a great wanderer, whose deepest love was the Himalayas. In this, as in so much else, he showed a spirit akin to that of the ancient *rishis* among whom his countrymen's veneration placed him. His *Autobiography* rejoices in the mighty hills, which cast a spell on his soul beyond any other.

<sup>1</sup> In *Kalpanā*. I use my own translations throughout this book, except when otherwise stated.

Shortly before sunset I reached a peak called Sunghri. How and when the day passed away I knew not. From this high peak I was enchanted with the beauty of two mountain ranges facing each other. . . . The sun set, and darkness began gradually to steal across the earth. Still I sat alone on that peak. From afar the twinkling lights here and there upon the hills alone gave evidence of human habitation.<sup>1</sup>

It is very noticeable how little attraction Nature in some of her grander and vaster manifestations has exercised over Rabindranath. No poet has felt more deeply and constantly the fascination of the great spaces of earth and sky, the boundless horizon and white lights of evening, the expanse of moonlight. To the way these have touched him with peace and the power of beauty a thousand passages in his work bear witness. To this aspect of his poetry we are bound to return. But mountains touched his imagination comparatively little. He would not be Rabindranath if he had not laid them under contribution to furnish pictures :

. . . the great forest trees were found clustering closer, and from underneath their shade a little waterfall trickling out, like a little daughter of the hermitage playing at the feet of hoary sages wrapt in meditation.<sup>2</sup>

But that is not the language of the man on whose soul the great mountains have thrown their shadow, so that he loves them to the end. It has but to be placed beside the authentic utterance, to be seen for what it is, a graceful image which the mind has gathered for itself *outside* itself.

How and when the day passed away I knew not.

The tall cataract

Haunted me like a passion.<sup>3</sup>

Rabindranath loved Nature, but it was Nature as she comes close to the habitations of men. His rivers are not left for long without a sail on their surfaces ; they flow by meadow and pasture. His flowers and bees are in garden and orchard ; his 'forest' is at the hamlet's door. His

<sup>1</sup> pp. 240-1.

<sup>2</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth



fellow-men were a necessity to him. Even so, it remains noteworthy how little of mountains we hear in his verse. Of rains and rivers, trees and clouds and moonlight and dawn, very much is spoken ; but of mountains little.<sup>1</sup>

He saw also much of the north-west country, carrying away a particular memory of the Golden Temple of the Sikhs at Amritsar. Already, though only a boy, he had seen far more of his native land than most see in a lifetime.

It was on his return home that he put into effect his magnificent powers of passive resistance, and won the first of many victories. He was sent to the Bengal Academy, and then to St Xavier's. But his resolute refusal to be educated stood proof against authority and blandishment and he was allowed to study at home.

<sup>1</sup> A friend writes : ' You are quite right about mountains. As he once told me (up at Darjiling), these massive screens of stone block the eye—they are rigid and unchanging—they narrow down the freedom of space. *Light, free wind, open space*, are constantly recurring phrases in his work.' But he has fine Himalayan poems in *Naivedya*, *Uttarga*, and elsewhere.



## JUVENILIA

THE Vaishnava lyrics are the most popular poems of Bengal, with the exception, perhaps, of Ramprasad's *Sāktā* songs. Their poetical value is over-assessed, a fact which Rabindranath recognized in later years. But they enabled him to find his great lyrical gift, when he read them at the age of fifteen, and gratitude for this great service remained with him, through all his later moods of severity of judgement. In conversation he outlined his two debts to them. 'I found in the Vaishnava poets lyrical movement; and images startling and new.' Neither Hemchandra Banerji nor Nabinchandra Sen (he said) produced any new lyrical forms; their metres were experimental and stiff. Thought of them sometimes seemed to make him angry. 'I have no patience with these folk. They introduced nothing new, their forms were the same old monotonous metre.' But in the Vaishnava poets, language was fluid, verse could sing. 'I am so grateful that I got to know them when I did. They gave me *form*. They make many experiments in metre. And then there was the boldness of their imagery. Take this from Anantadas: "Eyes starting like birds about to fly".'

The boy-poet read also the story of Chatterton, which exercised its natural fascination; and he made himself a poetical incarnation in a supposed old Vaishnava singer, *Bhānu Singh*—'Lion of the Sun', with a play frequent in his verse, on the meaning of his name *Rabi*.<sup>2</sup> He has told gleefully how these *Bhānu Singh* songs (first published in *Bhārati*,<sup>3</sup> 1877) deceived Vaishnava enthusiasts, and how

<sup>1</sup> This seems to be from Lochandas, not Anantadas.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Sun.'

<sup>3</sup> A periodical; *Bhārati* is a name of Sarasvati, Goddess of Learning and Poetry.

Nishikanta Chatterji was awarded a German Ph.D. for a treatise on ancient Vaishnava poetry, in which Bhanu Singh was lauded. Rabindranath's later judgement on the series may be quoted :

Any attempt to test Bhanu Singh's poetry by its ring would have shown up the base metal. It had none of the ravishing melody of our ancient pipes, but only the tinkle of a modern, foreign barrel-organ.<sup>1</sup>

The *Bhānu Singh* lyrics sort and arrange, in as many ways as the poet can think of, the old themes of the Vaishnava singers—the unkindness and neglect of Krishna, the sorrow of deserted Radha, flowers, flutes in the forest, the woman going to tryst in heavy rain. All the time Bhanu Singh chides or consoles or advises the disconsolate Radha. This town-bred boy-poet manages to convey a distinct freshness, as of winds in a wood, and he has beautiful touches. 'Like dream-lightning on the clouds of sleep, Radha's laughter glitters.'

His literary career is generally considered to have begun with the *Bhānu Singh* poems ; but much scattered prose and verse had appeared earlier, especially in periodicals. In 1875 and 1876 an essay, *World-Charming Intelligence*, and two poems, *Wild Flowers* and *Lamentation*, appeared in *Gyānānkur—Sprouting Intelligence*—a magazine. *Wild Flowers* is a story in six parts. It appeared in book form in 1879,<sup>2</sup> in eight cantos, a total of 1,582 lines, not one of which was ever reprinted by the poet.

In 1877, *A Poet's Story*, a fragment of 1,185 lines, appeared in *Bhārati*. This was his first work to be published in book form, a friend printing it in 1878. Its first part is a highly idealized picture of his happy childhood, as the playmate of Nature. Later, become a man (aged fifteen or so !), he thinks by night of poetry, by day of science—this dualism of his thought thus early exhibited. It is fanciful, with plenty of easy personification, nymphs and goddesses :

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> It was written much earlier, when he was thirteen.



Night the Poet-Queen would sing  
Her magic spells, till everything  
One mysteriousness would seem ;  
All the world a glamorous dream.

Or,

The day the South Wind sighed, the bowers  
At her breath burst out in flowers ;  
That day the bird-quires sang ; that day  
Spring's Lakshmi<sup>1</sup> went her laughing way.

This is enchanted country, and all young poets have lived in it. But not all young poets have had access to a sublimer realm which this boy-poet knew :

When with clash and shout the storm  
Rocked the mountain's steadfast form,  
When dense clouds before the blow  
Scudded, frantic, to and fro,  
Lone on mountain-peaks I've been,  
And the mighty ruin seen.  
A thousand thunderbolts have sped  
With hideous laughter o'er my head ;  
Beneath my feet huge boulders leapt  
And roaring down the valleys swept ;  
Enormous snowfields left their place,  
Tumbled and hurled to the peak's base.

Better still is this vision of the midnight heavens :

In the wide sky  
Didst thou, Primeval Mother, spread  
Time's mighty plumes, far o'er my head,  
Those countless worlds there shepherding  
Under the shadow of thy wing.

After this, his poetry came out regularly in *Bhārati*. *Rudrachanda*, his earliest play, appeared as a book in 1881, and has not been reprinted, except for two songs. It consists of 800 lines, in fourteen scenes. The affectionate dedication to his elder brother Jyotirindranath tells us that it was written before he left for England, when he was

<sup>1</sup> Goddess of fortune and beauty. You may have a ' Household-Lakshmi ',  
a ' Bengal-Lakshmi ', a ' Forest-Lakshmi '.



sixteen or seventeen. The piece is poor melodrama. *Pity*, a novel, came out serially, 'a very indifferent imitation of Bankim, and not even interesting'.<sup>1</sup> Then there were stories in blank verse, *Gāthā*—*Garlands* or *Songs*—influenced by Scott's metrical romances. 'I do not even remember what they were about', the poet told me. 'My sister has a book called *Gāthā*. I suppose it must be these.' We find many scattered pieces, chiefly lyrical: *A Morning-Song*, *Even-Song*, *Woman*, *The First Glimpse*, *The Love of a Nymph*, *Lilā*<sup>2</sup> (an untranslatable word which we shall meet later). These themes are orthodox, and the titles do not excite surprise in those familiar with poetical beginnings. More distinctively Indian are *Āgamani*—*The Coming* (1877, *Bhārati*), a poem celebrating the coming of the goddess Uma to her father's home, *Salutation to India* (1880, *Bhārati*), and *Kālī in Siva's Heart* (1877-1880, *Bhārati*).

But it is the prose of this period which shows best how alert and eager his mind was. In 1877, he published in *Bhārati* an essay, *The Hope and Despair of Bengalis*, in which a master-theme of his whole life appears, the necessity of East and West to each other. Europe's intellectual freedom and India's conservatism, Europe's arts and India's philosophy, Europe's independence and India's mental tranquillity, must be moulded together, this boy insists, ere a better civilization can be made. In the same year, he turns his attention to the connexion between language and character, between literary and moral progress, and says 'A race cannot improve unless its language does'. In 1878, one number of *Bhārati* contains articles on *The Saxons and Anglo-Saxon Literature*, *Petrarch and Laura*, *Dante and His Poetry*, and on *Goethe*, all by Rabindranath. A sufficiently comprehensive sweep of interest, however second-hand and slight the knowledge, for a boy of seventeen! In 1879, *Bhārati* has articles on *The Normans and Anglo-Norman Literature*, and on *Chatterton*.

Before he was eighteen, he had published nearly seven thousand lines of verse, and a great quantity of prose.

<sup>1</sup> Mahalanobis.

<sup>2</sup> Play or drama.

From my quotations, the readers will have noted how like European, and especially English, poetry his early poems are. His considerable acquaintance with English poetry was great gain. The Sanskrit poets gave him a sound body of traditional Indian art, to keep his own work essentially vernacular. But the English Sarasvati may fairly claim from her Bengali sister a good deal of the credit of his training. Some of this, at any rate, came in England itself, for which he sailed in the autumn of 1877, returning fourteen months later.

About this visit to England he has written, with a humour that is half-bitterness, in his *Reminiscences*. He went to school at Brighton, where he was kindly treated by the other boys; he saw for the first time the earth white with snow; he left school, and went into dreary lodgings in a London square; he found a pleasanter home with a doctor, and he attended lectures on English literature at University College. I heard him speak of the pleasure which came from reading the *Religio Medici* with Henry Morley. Also, 'I read *Coriolanus* with him, and greatly enjoyed it. His reading was beautiful. And *Antony and Cleopatra*, which I liked very much'. A class-fellow was the brilliant and unfortunate Loken Palit, afterwards in the Indian Civil Service. A section of the *Reminiscences* is devoted to this friendship. Loken Palit lives, with all who ever met him, for his abounding enthusiasm, his keen joyousness. 'Like an arrow meeting a cross wind', he himself fell short. But his appreciation and understanding stimulated his friend.

Rabindranath returned to India apparently bringing little from his visit but some memories by no means all pleasant, and a knowledge of some plays of Shakespeare and the *Religio Medici*.

*Letters of a Traveller to Europe* appeared in *Bhārati* (1879-1880), and were re-issued as a book, still in print. They criticize the conduct of English 'society' ladies, and express genuine though patronizing admiration of the ladies of what used to be called the middle classes. Rabindranath thought more favourably of the social



morality of the West, as compared with that of the East, than his eldest brother Dwijendranath, editor of *Bhārati*, liked, and the brothers had a sharp controversy in that magazine.

He completed *The Broken Heart*, a lyrical drama begun in England, a very sentimental piece. It was published, and a hill-potentate sent his chief minister to the author to express his admiration. Today the poem has fallen into a gulf of oblivion, whence Rabindranath has refrained from rescuing it, except for a few songs and short passages. It is haunted by one of his favourite plots. A poet does not realize that he loves a girl till he has deserted her; he wanders from land to land, and returns to find her dying.

His English stay further manifested its influence in *The Genius of Vālmiki*, a musical drama. Music was always a main passion with him—he was as fertile a composer of tunes as of songs, and from his brain meaning and melody often sprang together—and while in England he had paid some attention to Western music. The tunes of *The Genius of Vālmiki* are half Indian, half European, inspired by Moore's *Irish Melodies*.

The piece keeps a place in his collected works. It is prefaced by three sentences deprecating any attempt to read it as a poem, apart from its music. It treats crudely, in a multitude of tiny scenes, the Indian legend of the robber-chief who became the author of the *Rāmāyana*. Valmiki, members of his band, Sarasvati—first disguised as a little girl whom the robber chieftain rescues from his followers, who wish to sacrifice her to Kali; and then apparent in her proper majesty, to reward her saviour with the gift of poetry—and Lakshmi rush in and out of the play, in a fashion which recalls nothing so much as rabbits popping in and out of their burrows on a warm summer evening. There is a chorus of wood-nymphs, who open the play with a lament which recalls Tennyson's infelicitous introduction of 'Titania' ('if it be she—but Oh, how fallen! how changed!' from the imperious

\* Act II, Scene 2. Rabindranath told me that the resemblances to English folk-lore in his play were accidental.



empress of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*!) from *The Foresters*.

My soul weeps! It cannot bear it, cannot bear it! Our beloved woods are a burning-ground. The robber-bands have come; and destroy all peace. With terror the whole landscape is trembling. The forest is troubled, the wind weeps, the deer start, the birds sing no longer. The green companies of trees swim in blood, the stones burst asunder at the voices of piteous wailing. Goddess Durga, see! These woods are fear-stricken: Restrain these lawless men, and give us peace!

Despite the accusations of this chorus, the robber-band seem pretty harmless folk. They bluster a good deal, and make a great show of being very violent. But the only person they seem to intend harm against is the disguised Sarasvati, and their chief does not have any real difficulty in checking them here. There is dignity in the long speech with which Sarasvati closes the play:

Listening to thine immortal song, the sun,  
Child, on the world's last day his course shall run.  
Long as the sun endure, long as the moon,  
Thou to thy harp shalt sound thy mighty tune,  
O first and chief of poets!

Had Rabindranath died at Chatterton's age, a Bengali<sup>1</sup> Dr Johnson might have used similar words of his abundance. Lowell's words on Keats recur to memory.

Happy the young poet who has the saving fault of exuberance, if he have also the shaping faculty that sooner or later will amend it!

Prose and verse flowed in equal volume, as they flowed ever after, his vein resembling that waterfall, in whose praise his mind spontaneously found her true freedom, as he has told us.<sup>2</sup>

Of this early period—his *Saisabkāl*, as he has styled it, or *Childhood*—he selected forty-seven poems or parts of poems, under the title of *Kaisorāk*—'Juvenilia', in the first collected edition of his poems in 1896. These, with the exception

<sup>1</sup> Dr Johnson thought it astonishing that 'the whelp' (the boy Chatterton) could have written so much.

<sup>2</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 217.

of twenty *Bhānu Singh* songs, are all he cared to preserve. More than eleven thousand lines of verse published before he was twenty he never reprinted. He was sufficiently known as a rising poet, for a selection of his earliest verse to be issued in 1881, as *Saisab-Sangit—Songs of Childhood*.

The pieces show him in possession of a device which he was to use far more than most poets, that of repetition and the refrain. The metres are easily handled and are musical. The subjects are not as fresh as the young poet perhaps thought them. There are gloomy pieces, full of the disillusionment which is often the bitter experience of poets not three-quarters through their teens: there are love-poems: there are poems which celebrate dawn and evening and cry for rest: there are poems of journeying. Many are on flowers, one of the earliest celebrating that much-praised flower, the Rose:

Rose-Maiden,  
 Ah, my Rose-Maiden!  
 Lift your face, lift your face,  
 And light the blossomy grove!  
 Why so shy?  
 Why so shy?  
 Hiding close your face among your leaves,  
 Why so shy?

He narrowly escaped a second English visit. When he was about twenty, he sailed for England, to qualify for the Bar. But Sarasvati was watchful, and frustrated this new attempt to 'educate' her son. His companion, an older nephew, suffered so much from sea-sickness that he turned back at Madras. The poet, possibly sea-sick also, accompanied him, doubting of the parental reception which awaited him. The Maharshi, perhaps never very enthusiastic as to his future as a pleader, merely said, 'So you have come back. All right, you may stay.'



## THE HEART-WILDERNESS

There is a vast forest named the Heart,  
Limitless all sides—  
Here I lost my way.

*Morning Songs*

WHEN *The Broken Heart* was written, Rabindranath was well launched upon those stormy seas which begin a poet's career, the period of his introspective sorrows; of his journeyings, not home to his habitual self, but to a false self, full of mournings, sensitive and solitary. Keats has said :

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the ambition thick-sighted.<sup>1</sup>

That 'space of life between' is the mood of *Evening Songs*. This, like each successive book of verse, for the next half-dozen years, represents a big stride forward, in style and mastery of material, from *The Broken Heart* and *The Genius of Valmiki*. But in its lyrics everything draws its hues from the poet's mind. The atmosphere is sombre to monotony; thought is choked by vague emotion, or shines dimly through the mists of imaginary feeling. Dr Seal writes of their 'intense egoistic subjectivity, untouched by any of the real interests of life or society'.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the poems, in the expressive simplicity of their diction, were in advance of anything then being written. The whole book points to his later achievement, and has an importance out of proportion to its merits. He is feeling his way, and has no sureness of touch in metre, no firm control of cadence. But already there is no mistaking

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Endymion*.

<sup>2</sup> Seal, *New Essays in Criticism*, p. 76.



the master of language, the magician who can call up cloud after cloud of rich imagery.

The very first piece shows alike the defects of outlook and theme, and the wealth of fancy. Shortly after its publication, the poet was invited to a marriage-feast at Rameshchandra Datta's house. As he came up, people were garlanding 'the Scott of Bengal', Bankim Chatterji. Putting by the tribute, Bankim said 'You must garland *him*. Have you not read his *Invocation*?' In the manner of the time, he looked about for an English comparison, and added, 'It is better than Collins's *Ode to Evening*'.

Spirit of Evening!

Sitting alone beneath the limitless sky! Taking the world in your lap, shaking out your dishevelled locks, bending above it your face full of love, full of loveliness! Very softly, very softly, ah! what words are you whispering, what songs are you crooning to yourself, as you look into the world's face?

Day after day I have heard those words, yet today I do not understand them. Day after day I have heard those songs, yet I have not learnt them. Only heavy sleep weighs down my lids, a load of thought oppresses my soul. Yet . . . deep within my heart . . . deeper, deeper still, in its very core . . . there sounds a voice which answers to your voice. Some world-forsaking exile from I know not what land is singing in unison with you. Spirit of Evening, 'tis as if some neighbour, a dweller in your own land, a brother almost, has lost his way on this alien earth of my soul, where he wanders weeping. Hearing your voice, it is as if he heard the songs of his own land, and suddenly from far away he responds, he opens his heart. All around he looks; as if seeking you he wanders, restless and eager! . . . How many memories of ancient converse, how many lost songs, how many sighs of his spirit . . . O Evening! have lost themselves in this darkness of yours! Their floating hosts fill your darkness, they wander in the calm heart of Eternity, like broken fragments of a shattered world. I sit at your feet, on this river's brink, and the flock about me, circling around me. . . .

*Evening Songs* bears the mark of its tentative and transitional character on every poem. All is experimental, both thought and metre. Dr Seal speaks of 'maenad-like visitings', which fill the twilight of a young poet's mind

with ghostly wings. But the maenads, after all, were creatures of very considerable vigour. The denizens of the world of *Evening Songs* are hardly ever ghosts. The poet's tricks are simple, and in a very few pages we know that we are not ignorant of his devices. There is the repeated striking of one note, till the mind is jaded or maddened, as by coppersmith or brainfever-bird in the sweltering heats. Among poets with any claim to greatness only Swinburne has such a vocabulary of repetitions as is Rabindranath's. *Silence, soul, heart, song and speech, lonely, dense, deep, the skirts of the sky or the forest, tears, sighs, stars, bride, caresses, love, death*—these are the words with which he weaves and reweaves an endless garland of sad-pretty fancies. There are the same images. The weeping traveller of *Invocation* is to be a nuisance in the poet's forests for many a day. These faults flaw not *Evening Songs* alone, but the books of the next half-decade. It is the more curious that his genius should have stagnated in this respect, when in every other way his progress was so rapid. Even when he was world-famous, though he had enlarged his range of illustration, he had not cast away his besetting risk of monotony and had a tendency, when inspiration failed, to fall back on certain lines of thought and language, and the old tropes reappeared, *tears, stars, moonlight*. From first to last, he is an extremely mannered poet, as well as a most unequal one. And the sorrow of *Evening Songs* is as unreal as ever filled a young poet's mind, in love with its own opening beauty. No Muse weeps on so little provocation as the Bengali Muse; and though Rabindranath's Muse offends less than the general, she is tearful enough. It is a nation that enjoys being thoroughly miserable!

But the essential thing to remember is that this boy was a pioneer. Bengali lyrical verse was in the making. A boy of eighteen was striking out new paths, cutting channels for thought to flow in.

In *Evening Songs* I first felt my own freedom from bondage of imitation of other poets. Unless you know the history of our lyric, you cannot understand how audacious it was to break the conventions



of form and diction. You may call the metres of *Evening Songs* rhymed *vers-libre*. I felt great delight, and realized my freedom at once.<sup>1</sup>

The reader today must admire the extraordinary freedom of the verse—formless freedom too often, but all this looseness is going to be shaken together presently, the metres are to become knit and strong. Further, this was the first genuine romantic movement in Bengali. The book was ‘defiantly lyrical—almost morbidly personal’.<sup>2</sup> In Mohitchandra Sen’s edition of the poet’s works in 1903, when poems were grouped by similarity of character and not chronologically, *Evening Songs* and earlier pieces were put under the heading ‘Heart-Wilderness’. The title was apt.

The book falls into two fairly clearly-marked divisions. The earlier poems are the more valuable, their thinness and unreality being more than redeemed by zest and by genuine, sometimes exquisite, beauty of detail. The second group are more marred by conceits, and show the poet moving about, or rather floundering, in worlds not realized. All the poems suffer from his trick of parallelism, one of the laziest and most constant of his mannerisms. Here the parallelism is between *sing* and *say*.

All is gone ! there is nothing left to say !

All is gone ! there is nothing left to sing !

In the later poems, catalogues of the raggedest kind, often occur whole passages of this sort :

Compassion is the wind of the world,  
Compassion is the sun and moon and stars,  
Compassion is the dew of the world,  
Compassion is the rain of the world.  
Like the stream of a mother’s love,  
As this Ganges which is flowing,  
Gently to creeks and nooks of its banks  
Whispering and sighing—  
So this pure compassion  
Pours on the heart ;  
Appeasing the world’s thirst,  
It sings songs in a compassionate voice.

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> Mahalanobis.



Compassion is the shadow of the forest,  
 Compassion is the dawn's rays,  
 Compassion is a mother's eyes,  
 Compassion is the lover's mind.<sup>1</sup>

It may be said once for all that when in my versions of his early poems a word is repeated—as above, where *Compassion* sings in a *compassionate* voice—the repetition is there because in the Bengali. Some day a Bengali stylist will forbid the use of a word too close upon its previous use; but the literary conscience is not sensitive on the point as yet.

This was the period when Shelley's *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* was the perfect expression of his mind—when he could feel that poem as if written for him, or by him.<sup>2</sup> Since every prominent Bengali writer was equated with some English one, he was 'the Bengali Shelley', and that erratic entrancing spirit was the chief foreign influence on his work. In later years, like other poets, he lost this idol. 'I have long outgrown that enthusiasm', he once told me. Yet even in later years he recurred fondly to the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*. Its influence crops up continually in his early work, so often that I shall indicate it only once or twice, leaving the reader, as a rule, to notice it for himself. When he wrote *Evening Songs*, his mind resembled Shelley's in many things; in his emotional misery, his mythopœia, his personified abstractions. But these last are bloodless in the extreme, resembling far more the attendants in the death-chamber of Adonais,

Desires and Adorations,  
 Winged Persuasions and veiled Destinies,  
 Splendours and Glooms, and glimmering Incarnations  
 Of hopes and fears, and twilight Phantasies;  
 And Sorrow, with her family of Sighs,  
 And Pleasure, blind with tears, led by the gleam  
 Of her own dying smile instead of eyes,  
 Came in slow pomp—the moving pomp might seem  
 Like pageantry of mist on an autumnal stream—

<sup>1</sup> This, and many similar passages, were omitted in the poet's revised text later.      <sup>2</sup> Conversation.

than the figures of the *West Wind* ode—the blue Mediterranean, ‘lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams’, or the approaching storm, with its locks uplifted ‘like the hair of a fierce Maenad’.

Yet if we take *Evening Songs* at their best, how beautiful in their languorous fashion these poems are! One of the finest songs is *Evening*—prophetic title and theme. Already there is his power of making an atmosphere. The poem has all the shortcomings of *Evening Songs*, yet it transcends them triumphantly. There is no depth of feeling—feeling has not begun. It is all abstractions; and the poet is obsessed by the image of a mother and child. But out of this tenuous stuff he makes a lullaby. The metres, winding their cunning monotonous coils, suggest the weaving of spells, the verse seeming to wave arms in incantation. The last paragraph contains the first draft of one of the prettiest things in his English *Gitanjali* :<sup>1</sup>

Come, Evening, gently, gently, come!  
 Carrying on your arm your basket of dreams!  
     Humming your spells,  
 Weave your garland of dreams!  
     Crown my head with them!  
     Caress me with your loving hand!  
 The river, heavy with sleep, will sing in murmurs  
     A half-chant woven in sleep;  
     The cicadas will strike up their monotonous tune.

And the poem ends with the filmy dreamy atmosphere he loves so well.

It is like Indian music; plaintive and simple, on one strain. Harmony is not used, though later he is to use it magnificently. So he sketches a mood of desolation, in which life seems empty. In *The Heart's Monody* he rebukes himself for this one song of shadowy sorrow that he sings. It has some lines on a dove (a shadow-dove, of course) :

On my heart's tumbled foundations, in the still noon,  
 A dove sits sole, singing its sole tune,—  
     None knows why it sings!



Hearing its grieved plaint, silence grows with weeping faint,  
And Echo wails, Alas ! alas !

Heart ! Then nothing have you learnt,  
But this one song alone !

Among the thousand musics of the world,  
Ever this one moan !

None will hearken to your song !

What matter if they do not ?

Or, hearing, none will weep !

What matter if they do not ?

Give over, give over, Soul ! So long

I cannot bear to hear it—this same song ! this same song !

*The Wail of Happiness*, an exquisite piece, is one of those which represent the very real achievement of *Evening Songs*. Moonlight—his real Muse—inspires him, and floods his dream with beauty ; every gentle sight and sound are blended in one perfect invocation.

Happiness sighs,

Shutting her drowsed eyes :

‘ Sweet is this moonlight, sweet . . .

A flute plays, far . . . far away . . .

A burden of gentle sleep

Has touched Night’s laughing lids.

Waves gently swell on the river ;

Gently on the trees leaves quiver.’

*Loss of the Ego* stands out by a certain objectivity, the thought plainly beginning to pass away from this unreal world. Images are bolder, clearer in outline. In it he uses his famous ‘ forest ’ simile.<sup>1</sup> His early joy has vanished, and he is entangled in a dark wood, where he has lost his way. He has not seen his old self for many days. That which was has vanished, lost in a jungle of subjectivity. He cries out to God for light and air. Thus, *Evening Songs* finishes—for *Loss of the Ego* is one of its very latest poems, as well as one of the last three in the printed order—with a piece of accurate diagnosis and self-criticism that promise well for the young poet’s future.

<sup>1</sup> Readers will remember the opening of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.



## EMERGENCE: DRAMATIC BEGINNINGS

THE space I have given to *Evening Songs* is justified by Rabindranath's own words :<sup>1</sup>

To me this is the most memorable period of my poetic career. For the first time I had come to write what I really meant, just according to my pleasure.

But there can be no question of the immense advance in merit of *Morning Songs*,

the first throwing forth of my inner self outwards. In the *Morning Songs* I celebrated the sudden opening of a gate.<sup>2</sup>

The poems were born out of a new experience, of sheer joy in the world and of union with it. *The Awakening of the Waterfall* 'gushed forth and coursed on like a veritable cascade'.<sup>3</sup> This is the experience out of which it sprang :

One morning I happened to be standing on the verandah. The sun was just rising through the leafy tops of those trees. As I continued to gaze, all of a sudden a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side. This radiance pierced in a moment through the folds of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart, and flooded it with this universal light.<sup>4</sup>

*Morning Songs* shows the rising of his healthier intellectual self above the mists—the miasma, almost—of self-obsession, the vague miseries of adolescence. The book has its own faults of over-emphasis, of dwelling on his new-found freedom with a convert's earnestness, till the aggressive assertions of mental robustness and of catholic sympathy take on a monotony of their own. Their zest, however,

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 217.

makes them endurable when the languors of *Evening Songs* pall ; and the poems witness to a remarkably quick escape from that slough of despond which seems to engulf almost all poets early in their race. In this fact lies the importance of *Morning Songs*—the poems face his future and resolutely forsake his past. Their metre, also, is firm and sure, after *Evening Songs*. Repetitions are fewer, and his mannerisms are temporarily in some abeyance ; while almost every strain to be found in his poetical range in later days has its preluding note struck in some poem.

*The Awakening of the Waterfall* is the key-poem of *Morning Songs*. The sudden freedom which has come to him finds clamorous expression in the fierce vigour of its movement, the passionate happiness of its pictures :

The mountain trembles, the stones  
In vast screes clattering pour ;  
The waters, swelling and foaming,  
In anger and tumult roar ;  
In their mighty exultation  
They would rend the mountain asunder ;  
Mad with the morning's rays,  
Through earth they would crash and thunder.

And I—I will pour of compassion a river ;  
The prisons of stones I will break, will deliver ;  
I will flood the earth, and, with rapture mad,  
Pour music glad.

With dishevelled tresses, and gathering flowers,  
With rainbow wings widespread, through the hours  
I shall run and scatter my laughter bright  
In the dear sunlight.

I shall run from peak to peak, and from hill  
To hill my leaping waters spill,  
Loudly shall laugh and with claps keep time  
To my own steps' chime.

The poem is remarkable for its natural beauty ; an example of this is its picture of the frozen cave, into which a ray of light has pierced, melting its coldness, causing the waters to gather drop by drop—a Himalayan picture, mossy and chill. The piece is a favourite with his countrymen, and



marks a most important point in his history. In passing, it may be noted that its symbolism recurs throughout his work. No poet has more constantly worked over and over again his favourite lines of thought. Here we find him tracing the course of the river rising in that cave, till it blends with the sea. It flows through cultivation :

Green are my two banks,  
Where flowers grow in ranks.  
The waves, in crafty play,  
Kiss them, and run away,

and ends in infinity, in perfect cleansing rest. In this aspect, the poem is the first sketch of what he filled in, a dozen years later, in *The River*. But even that poem was only an intermediate stage, in the evolution of this simile, of a stream and a life. His poetry did not forget the old theme, but found new ways of filling it with ever-deepening richness, as in *The Ichchhāmati River*, which I saw in manuscript in 1921, the morning it was written.

Three pieces show his strong interest in modern science. He insisted always that the West's achievements in the conquest of natural forces have been stupendous, and that it is certain ruin for his countrymen to neglect them. The story of the earth, the record of physical science, fascinated him. So even in *Morning Songs*, in the Bengal of forty years ago, we find him, in the two complementary poems, *Endless Life* and *Endless Death*, giving us close reasoning, and verse as scientific in outlook and illustration as anything that was being written anywhere. Both poems, despite the latter's title, lean to the side of optimism, for he was always impressed by the endless succession of new births, by the indestructibility of matter and of life. He protests against the excessive cult of that flitting experience which we call the Present :

What is Present—do you call that Life ? It is merely flying moments. On its back is the dead weight of the Past ; and I know not where it will finish.

The third of these kindred pieces, *Creation, Conservation and Destruction*, is much the greatest. It has none of the

prosaic enumeration of the other two, but opens with a marvellous synthesis of the two most impressive pictures of the world's beginning known to him, that of modern science and that of Indian mythology. A profound philosophical understanding welds the whole. Thought is lit up by imagination, and we have an unforgettable picture of the vast wastes, and of primal Energies at work. Brahma the Creator is meditating amid the huge formless emptiness, while the Darkness waits in fear for his awakening. All life to be is folded up within his heart. He opens his eyes, and utters the great hymn of creation; from his four mouths the creative words fly forth, to all quarters, on their endless travels, age after age. Space is filled with whirling fire-fountains, and burning nebulae, shaping themselves to become worlds. Vishnu, the preserver, takes up his conch, and blows. Order comes into being, lives and families replenish the earth. Vishnu the Eternal Poet writes on the Cosmos the great Poem of Creation, and garlands himself with the laurel of suns and stars. At rest upon the Lake Manas-sarowar, he gazes on the golden lotus; and, as he looks, from its petals rises Lakshmi, the World's Desire, resplendent in loveliness. But the earth and the other stars weary, in their endless round of law. The cry rises for the Great God to awake, to destroy these old bodies, that new may come. He awakes—Siva comes, mightily weaponed and shaking the worlds. Again, the primal fires are kindled, and creation dissolves in flame:

Broken suns and moons, crumbled stars and planets,  
Shower like flakes of darkness down.

All ends as it began, shrivelling to destruction. The Great God closes his eyes, and returns to his meditation.

A handful of translations—five from Victor Hugo, a long passage from Shelley—were printed with *Morning Songs*.

'Emergence' found other than lyrical expression. He was feeling in many directions after less subjective mediums. Now, as always, he was writing prose as well as verse. *Various Topics* are essays



not on any definite subject or plan, but in the spirit that boys catch butterflies. When spring comes within, many-coloured fancies are born and flit about in the mind.<sup>1</sup>

He wrote *The Young Queen's Market*, a novel; he calls this his first, as he does not acknowledge the earlier *Pity*. 'Some liked it', he said<sup>2</sup> of *The Young Queen's Market*, 'but it is very crude. I would expunge it, if I were free.' Other essays, *Discussions*, show his efficiency as a journalist and contain suggestive literary criticism.

*Morning Songs* were written in Calcutta. He was living in Sudder Street, now a dull section of the European quarter, but at that time more open. A pleasant sojourn at Karwar, on the western coast, followed. Here was an estuary, and vast sandy spaces: and in these surroundings he wrote *Nature's Revenge*,<sup>3</sup> his first important drama. That he should turn to drama was inevitable. Among his many gifts, he was a great actor. Bengal knew that he could act. In India, drama is in the common life. The legends of the gods are staged, in *lilās* such as those which, autumn by autumn, hold the villages of the United Provinces spell-bound. *Lilā*—'drama'—is, from first to last, a characteristic word of his poetry. The indigenous drama, like the Athenian, is played under the open skies, in court-yards or streets. It is dying out rapidly in Bengal, but survives in villages. *Jātrās* or travelling theatrical parties combine singing and acting. A *kavidal*, or 'group of poets', will have question and answer, in verse; or the whole cast will perform an episode from the story of Rama or of Krishna. Especially in the autumn, these indigenous plays, so like the old English mystery and miracle plays, visit the villages. But in Calcutta the modern theatre and still more the cinema have proved too financially rich and varied rivals for them.

These conditions, as might be supposed, were particularly favourable to Rabindranath's genius; his drama is more acceptable in open court-yard than in packed theatre.

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation.

<sup>3</sup> Published in English as *Sanyasi* (*Sacrifice and Other Plays*).

More and more, in his later work, he deliberately cultivated the vernacular tradition and drew ever closer to the folk-play. From this came a great merit, a deeply interpretative quality in his plays, which give the drifting pageant of an Indian road. But his plays soon practically disappeared from the Calcutta stage. They were acted by students or in the Tagore's Jorasanko house or at Santiniketan. The Brahmo circle kept their cult alive, and the poet himself trained his boys and girls as actors and singers.

His dramatic work is the vehicle of ideas, rather than the expression of action. *Nature's Revenge* tells how a hermit strove to cut away all bonds with the world, and so come to possession of truth; and how a girl brought him back to the world and 'into the bondage of human affections'.<sup>1</sup> The thought of this play is one of the key-thoughts of all his life:

. . . the great is to be found in the small, the infinite within the bounds of form, and the eternal freedom of the soul in love.

Nature took the Sannyasi to the presence of the Infinite, enthroned on the finite, by the pathway of the heart.<sup>2</sup>

I must quote his exposition further; for a poet's own account has rights over all others.

. . . on the one side the wayfarers and villagers, content with their home-made triviality and unconscious of anything beyond; and on the other the Sannyasi busy casting away his all, and himself, into the self-evolved infinite of his imagination. When love bridged the gulf between the two, and the hermit and the householder met, the seeming triviality of the finite and the seeming emptiness of the infinite alike disappeared.

*Nature's Revenge* is a sketch and not a finished composition. Travellers, students, villagers drift across the stage of the hermit's contemptuous perception of them. Shakespeare's *First Citizen*, *Second Citizen*, are full-blooded in comparison. All are shadows; and it is a shadow that watches them, looking 'upon the countless homes and haunts of men as ever shifting sandhills beat by a hollow-moaning

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 237.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, loc. cit.



sea'. Yet the shadow draws our wonder and pity, for through him a poet is speaking. Rabindranath's characters are reeds for the poet's brooding music, his meditations on life and death and on the many-coloured joy and sorrow of our race.

The poet has taken such liberties with his own text that the latter half of his translation has hardly any correspondence with the Bengali. The play, in the original, is extremely loose in construction; the scenes are ragged, with no clear beginnings or endings. Translating, Rabindranath has telescoped together with no dramatic loss whatever scenes that are not even contiguous in the Bengali. Then, there are far too many *dramatis personæ*, shadows that duplicate each other. Thirdly, the original is a swamp of declamation; everyone makes long speeches. Anything more improbable than the flower talk between the Sannyasi and the girl can scarcely be imagined. Bengali poets inherit a mighty tradition which overshadows them, making imagination reminiscent when it should be creative. Sakuntala bidding her plants farewell has never bidden Indian drama farewell. That farewell has so haunted succeeding poets that it is often an invocation which calls in a train of sentimentalities. The best things, dramatically, in *Nature's Revenge*, are the conversations on the road, which are full of simple obvious humour. This, and the presentation of the Sannyasi's inward fight, are the only respects in which the original surpasses the translation, which is a far more direct and effective exposition of the play's thought and teaching. The humour, however it may jade a subtle perception, is racy and natural; almost any group of Bengali villagers can improvise the same kind at any time, and with success. The poet, in translating, has left out much of this, which is such blood as his play possesses; and other parts he has watered down, as when the sleeper whose friends jokingly carry him off, shouting the death cry as for a corpse, wakes and insists he is not dead. The English makes him say

I am sorry to disappoint you, gentlemen, you have made a mistake. I was not dead, but fast asleep.

In the original, he cries out with the low-caste's terror on awaking from sleep to an unfamiliar situation. He offers proof that he is alive—his wife is still wearing her bracelets. They suggest a better proof—beat him, and see if he feels. They do so, and he howls, then flees. The poet need not have supposed that Western audiences had got so far from appreciation of farce and practical joking that he must leave this out. Athenian audiences laughed when Xanthias and Iacchus were beaten to test their divinity.<sup>1</sup> This kind of thing is not high-class literature. But it is the kind of thing that happens, and not the butler-like obsequiousness of 'I am sorry to disappoint you, gentlemen'.

On the drama's serious side, the most impressive thing is the passionate beginning of the last scene :

Let my vows of Sannyasi go. I break my staff and my alms-bowl. This stately ship, this world, which is crossing the sea of time,—let it take me up again, let me join once more the pilgrims.

This is crowned by the austere finish, which leaves the brave proud soul as lonely as it began, yet beyond computation richer for a possessed companionship.

Yet one feels that this is not drama, any more than what has gone before. The play began with an attitude which stood apart from humanity. It stirs into feeling, but the feeling is the poet's ; it is *his* life blood which floods these channels. And the play ends with philosophy : philosophy 'touched with emotion', if you like, and even with glimmering experience, but not with life itself.

For the rest, the glory of this scattered and chaotic piece is its poetry—poetry too much on the side of eloquence and rhetoric, but shot with imagination and a great suggestion of spaciousness, of the vast sublimities on which the Sannyasi's soul had fed itself. The beginning is mighty—seventy lines of crowded imagery, an extraordinarily fierce soliloquy ; to the poet Nature must have

<sup>1</sup> In *The Frogs*, by Aristophanes.



been a very vivid reality before he could create and express such resentment of her action and influence. The speech's atmosphere is as bleak and cold as that of the Himalayan cave in which it is laid—a naked spirit speaks, amid a naked world of winds and icicles. Then picture masses on picture, sublimity gathers to sublimity. Later passages rise again to this lofty level of poetry.

Bengalis claim that Rabindranath is one of the world's greatest poets of sorrow. The claim is not unfounded. The pathos of men's striving wasted lives, the sacrifice and loneliness of women's days, have found, since time began, few more profoundly moved spectators. For the sake of this pity, we can forget the play's weakness as drama; for this, and for its beauty. This is Indian, and is fine.

The bliss of Siva, filling  
The shadowless unstained Eternity,  
I have gained ! have gained the image of that bliss !

His own English version is not less beautiful :

That joy is mine, which comes to Siva when, after æons of dream,  
he wakes to find himself alone in the heart of the infinite annihilation.

Fine, too, is this :

Where in my heart lay hid this tiny wrath,  
Now flickering like a fire-tongued worm of Hell ?  
Out of what darkness springs with hissing forth ?

I recur, in closing, to the play's theme, a masterword to the poet's mind. *Nature's Revenge*

may be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my future literary work ; or, rather, this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt—the joy of attaining the Infinite within the finite.<sup>1</sup>

There is little enough of joy in this sombre drama ; but the lesson of the value of the finite, of this little life of days and nights, is clearly taught. As he says, in an epigram<sup>2</sup> of later date :

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup> *Chaitāli*.

Let whoso will, with shut and brooding eyes,  
If Earth be real or mere dream surmise !  
Meanwhile, let me with thirsty vision drink  
Its beauty ere my sun of life shall sink !

‘ It is strange ’, he said to me many years later, ‘ that even when so young I had that idea, which was to grow with my life all along, of realizing the Infinite in the finite, and not, as some of our Indian metaphysicians do, eliminating the finite.’

He returned from Karwar ; and married, in December, 1883.



## LAST POEMS OF YOUTH

*Pictures and Songs* broke into this first dramatic period. The name is fitting, almost all the pieces being sketches, often carefully detailed, or lyrics. The book is the record of his sensitiveness to sights and impressions, the notebook of his spirit.

A faculty of many-sightedness possessed me at this time. . . . I spent the livelong day painting away with the many-coloured fancies of my new-born youth.<sup>1</sup>

Again, he calls *Pictures and Songs*

a sort of bridge from *Morning Songs* to *Sharps and Flats*. I was getting more concrete in my subject. Before, I was hazy and emotional and my subject uncertain. I was living in Circular Road—a very nice house. I began to observe for the first time. I used to sit at the window, and watch the *bustis*<sup>2</sup> across our lawn, and all their activities used to delight me very much. I was no longer confined to my own feelings, but the outside world began to attract me.<sup>3</sup>

The pieces mark a further advance in command over form. Unhappily, his mannerisms are again intensified. He fills up whole stanzas with repetition and parallelism, and *tears, laughter, flowers, light*, and the rest—for they act as if under foremen, the mention of one serving as evocation of the whole troupe—are as tiresome as *beauty* and *April* and *blood* in some English 'Georgian' verse. There are far too many flutes, the cowherd fraternity apparently existing to make distant music at eventide; and far too many lost forest-wanderers. Nevertheless, the series represents a wider range of theme and experiment than anything he had done before.

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 240.

<sup>2</sup> Huts.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation.

The pictures stand out clearly, and are of many kinds. *Alone* shows a dusty village maiden threading her path through golden fields, against the gold sunset :

A girl, alone,  
At the evening hour  
Walks through the fields.  
On all sides of her the gold rice has ripened,  
On her face the evening glow has fallen ;  
Light glitters on her hair.

The West is golden-gold—  
Ah, who has seen such gold anywhere ?  
It is as if in the midst of this  
Someone has painted a drab maiden !

*The Yogi* is a picture that must date back to Karwar beach ; an ascetic, with matted hair and long, emaciated body, walking the sands before sunrise.

There is a great stillness everywhere. There is no sound in the universe except the great tune of the sea. It is as if the sea, with deep solemn voice, were chanting the sun's praise.

Dawn draws near.

As if the Yogi were a figure in a picture, the rays of the sun have shot upward and fallen on his face : pervading the spaces behind him, Night, a dark-featured nun, meditates with closed eyes. As when the River of the Immortals fell on the locks of Siva, in a flood of star-powdered silver, so from the bounds of the eastern horizon the splendour revels on the tangled locks of the sannyasi.

*The Love of Rāhu* is the book's outstanding poem—perhaps his greatest poem so far. It has intensity, swiftiness, imagination. Rahu is a bodiless planet who swallows the moon, causing eclipses, but cannot retain his prey—the eternal hunger which is never satisfied but ever pursues. In this poem, Rahu is love that is passionate, gripped with famine, a wolf that hunts down, a shadow that clings to the substance, a dark unseen self that is heard breathing when the frightened object of its love awakens at night. It is the pursuit of snake or weasel, never to be shaken off. It is like the presence of temperament, darkening thought



and action. Rabindranath never did a finer study of passion's pitiless cruelty. Such poems, few in the overshadowing bulk of other work though not inconsiderable in their actual number, are a joy amid all the flutes and flowers, the fraudulent woes and laughters.

But his first youth was ending. It closed with a period of sunny happiness. These

were days of utter freedom from care. Nothing in particular seemed to be anxious to express itself through my life or writings. I had not yet joined the throng of travellers on the path of Life, but was a mere spectator from my roadside window. Many a person hied by on many an errand as I gazed on, and every now and then Spring or Autumn or the Rains would enter unasked and stay with me for a while.<sup>1</sup>

He was doing a great deal of magazine-work, among other things practically editing *Balak*,<sup>2</sup> a Bengali *Boy's Own Paper*. For this he wrote *The Crown*, a short novel which, over twenty years later, he dramatized for the Santiniketan younger boys; this meant simply breaking it up into conversations, as it was half-dramatized already. The piece is quite valueless. He wrote also a better novel, *The Saint-King*—which later was worked up into his drama *Sacrifice*.

I wanted a serial for *Balak*, and was thinking about one. I was going to visit Ramnarayan Basu. The train was crowded, and an Englishman wouldn't allow the lamp to be hidden, so it burnt brightly all night and I couldn't sleep. But I dozed, and dreamed of a father and a girl before a temple. Blood was running out over the steps, and the girl was deeply pained. 'Why is this blood? Why is this blood?' she kept asking, and tried to wipe it away. Her father was very troubled, and couldn't answer her, so tried to silence her, really to silence his own mind. I woke up, and determined to put this in my story. And I used also the story of the Raja of Tripura, who introduced Vaishnavism into his state, and was banished by his brother.<sup>3</sup>

The story was written for boys, so had a didactic element, he adds. As to its rebirth as *Sacrifice*, it must be remembered that he is the thriftiest as well as the wealthiest of

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, pp. 243-4.

<sup>2</sup> Boy.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation.

poets, and attempts repeatedly that most difficult of all tasks, recension. Some of the descriptive passages in *The Saint-King* are fine, and these are incorporated in *Sacrifice* in almost their original form.

His acquaintance with Bankim Chatterji ripened into friendship, and even alliance, for they wrote for the same periodicals. They crossed swords before long, in religious controversy, out of which came a long spell of estrangement, closed by a generous letter from the older man, and sealed, long after Bankim's death, by the no less generous reference of the younger, in *Jibansmriti*.<sup>1</sup>

Bengal was full of new beginnings, of business attempts such as the steamer one in which his brother Jyotirindra failed, of political and literary organizations, of propaganda. In all this the young poet bore a part. During the years when he was 'the Bengali Shelley', he dressed with much eccentricity and exquisiteness. 'I wore my hair long and indulged probably in an ultra-poetical refinement of manner.'<sup>2</sup> We are told that he introduced among educated Bengalis the fashion of wearing long wavy hair, and what is known as the Napoleon beard. 'My recognized cognomen was the Lispings Poet', he says; adding, 'My attainments were few, my knowledge of life meagre, and both in my poetry and prose the sentiment exceeded the substance.'<sup>3</sup>

His apprenticeship was finishing, but one or two more books fall within it. *Sharps and Flats* is

a serenade from the streets in front of the dwelling of man, a plea to be allowed an entry and a place within that house of mystery.

This world is sweet,—I do not want to die.

I wish to dwell in the ever-living life of Man.<sup>4</sup>

There can be no question that *Sharps and Flats* is a richer and better book than any before it. Its variety is the more welcome, because his previous books seemed to say that, whatever other merits this poet might have,

<sup>1</sup> Translated as *My Reminiscences*.

<sup>2</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 249.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 266.



he would not have this one. Sonnets take up a large part of the book, some of them of the ordinary Elizabethan form, others variations of the Italian one, with every conceivable arrangement of rhyme and differing length of line.

One group of sonnets at once made the book a storm-centre. This group was defiantly erotic; sonnets on his mistress's kiss, her arms, feet, body, smile, the wind of her skirt, the sky of her heart, two on her breast, one on her nakedness. One sonnet, *Bodily Union*, is as frank as D. H. Lawrence. *Her Arms*, like so much of his work, omits nothing that occurs to him, and is distressing to read. *Her Feet* has such perverted ingenuity as 'It is as if the two lights of dawn and sunset have set in the shadow of her two feet'; and it ends with the invocation, 'Come, O come to my heart! There the red lotus of Desire, blushing with shame, is languishing'. *Kisses* is a morass of conceits. In India, a confluence of streams is a place of pilgrimage, holy; Rabindranath naturalizes in his verse common customs of daily life, a noble gift here prostituted to 'Leaving their homes, two loves have made a pilgrimage to the confluence of lips!' Following this couplet comes 'In the law of Love two waves have swelled, breaking and mingling on two lips'.

He is trying to prove that he is a realist, a catholic lover of beauty, to whom nothing is common or unclean. His pre-occupation with the body is literary rather than genuine; to me, at least, these sonnets read very insincerely. The Vaishnava poets had hymned this theme with endless iteration, and the amorists of the West had used the sonnet for trivial subjects till that splendid medium had become a synonym for pettiness—he, too, would keep in the tradition. This is not the whole truth, though. I add his own words.

There is sensuality. I am willing to admit that there is an element which is carnal. But there is also the reaction, very strongly expressed in the later poems of the series, the trouble to escape from the same sensuality. I wanted to get rid of it completely. Just as in *Evening Songs* there is a struggle to get out of the subjective

world of one's moods and moodiness, into the open, so in these sonnets the mind is struggling to escape from this bondage to the senses, for it kills the freedom of the mind.<sup>1</sup>

But, he concludes,

they all have a unity, all belong to the drama of life.

A friend<sup>2</sup> says of these poems

Rabindranath's Byronic reputation stands secure on them. In fact, to Bengali moralists the songs of *Gītānjali* are 'mere effusions of a sentimental temperament', because he has written these sonnets. To me he is open to criticism from quite a different side altogether. He lacks fire, he is never *in* it. A peculiar restraint, a lack of abandon, sometimes spoils the whole thing. He is always carried away by the imagery, the many suggestions of beauty; emotion and passion lag behind, so that he is always in a reminiscent mood, full of musings. In fact, his singular detachment—the characteristic going beyond the sense-enjoyment—is evident everywhere.

The discipline of the sonnet enriched his expression, even though he afterwards discarded a form 'of its own arduous fulness reverent' and chose an easy-going modification, which is merely seven rhymed couplets. For the often intolerable diffuseness of his early work, he was learning to 'load every rift with ore', instead of filling up interstices with quartz and rubble. He was training himself in compression; the old tropes showed a tendency to vanish, not needed where the poet had so much to say and only fourteen lines in which to say it. Imagination was rising through the waves of fanciful simile and ingenious resemblance, like his own Urvashi out of the ocean.

The sonnets represent the most remarkable achievement of *Sharps and Flats*. But the book has other beautiful poems. There is a handful about childhood and children. One of these, *Benediction*, is translated in his *Crescent Moon*—'Bless this little heart'—and is still beautiful and tender there, though grievously watered down. Folk-lore mingles with some poems. 'The Rain Falls Pit-a-pat, the River Swells', a poem whose first lines evoke the rainy evenings of his childhood, the gathered clouds, the menace of

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> Mahalanobis.



thunder and lightning without, and the tales of fairyland within, is sheer charm. East and West have so borrowed each other's fairy tales that the stories the young Rabindranath heard are very like those told in Europe—tales of enchanted princesses, of wicked step-mothers, of dragons. Through the poem runs the refrain of that nursery rhyme :

The Rain falls pit-a-pat, the River swells.

But, as he says, *when* that rain fell, and *where* that river flowed, he knows not ; only remain, in eternal possession, the memories those words bring back, and the glamour of unforgotten days. *The Seven Chāmpā Brothers* is another delightfully playful dancing poem, which tells of the seven *chāmpā* buds and the red *pārul* blossom, their sister, and traces their days and nights, their thoughts and experiences, as they swung on the boughs, thinking ever of their mother, compelled to serve as Cinderella by the jealous co-wife of the king, their father. That bad woman has transformed them into flowers, but they cannot forget. Night by night their sister tells them stories but, as the last line of every stanza reminds us, thought of their mother returns :

At their *pārul*-sister's tale, their mother comes in mind.

*A Song of Benediction*, addressed to that inspirer of so much of his work, his niece Indira (Mrs Pramathanath Chaudhuri), is perhaps the most ambitious piece in *Sharps and Flats*. It keeps a high didactic level, from its spacious beginning :

This mighty world, vast-ocean-girdled,  
Swings in the deep of heaven's sea,

but is much too long. The poet speaks disparagingly of the noise and clamour of the times in which he lives, and urges his friend to live the larger life of sun and star and natural forces. She is to bring in a new and finer age, she of whom he sings :

In your face is heaven's light,  
And in your heart the break of dawn.

The poet is young enough to believe that a friend who charms his own life can charm the larger world also, and

bring in nobler thoughts and unselfishness. It reminds us of the power that Shelley ascribed to those whom he idealized, those beneath whose influence

Every sprite beneath the moon  
Would repent its envy vain,  
And the Earth grow young again.

The poem's finish interests as being the first declaration that Rabindranath is aware that his verse will be immortal. His claim has not the proud confidence of

Not marble, or the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,

or of

queens hereafter shall be glad to live  
Upon the alms of thy superfluous praise.<sup>1</sup>

But the poet knows; and in the more modest fashion of our day tells us that he knows.

There is a handful of love-songs, popular everywhere, even today sung everywhere. 'A few can rival even music-hall favourites.' In *Sharps and Flats* what is perhaps his most distinctive gift and the one most prized by himself, his gift of song definitely arrived. This gift came late; for, despite the melody of his earlier pieces, that melody was clogged and uncertain. But the gift, if arriving later than with most poets who have possessed it, stayed longer.

Whom thou didst with tearful eyes send hence  
Wouldst thou now recall—on what pretence?  
While the south wind, soft and light, roams the flowery grove  
this night,  
In the *bakul*<sup>2</sup> shadow sitting,  
Through thy mind his image flitting—  
Would'st thou him recall—on what pretence?

There are two more stanzas of this popular song, which was afterwards included in *The Play of Illusion*. During the first World War, it became a favourite with the Bengali

<sup>1</sup> Drayton, *Idea*.

<sup>2</sup> Mahalanobis.

<sup>3</sup> *Mimusops Elengi*, a

favourite tree of Bengali poets. Its flowers are sweet-scented.



battalion, and their camps in India and Mesopotamia resounded with it.

Lastly, *Sharps and Flats* contained many translations: Shelley's *Stanzas Written in Dejection*, Ernest Myers's *Arousal*, Mrs Browning's *Irreparableness* ('I have been in the meadows all the day'), Christina Rossetti's *May* ('I cannot tell you how it was'), Hood's Sonnet 'It is not death, that some time in a sigh', Philip Marston's *After* ('A little time for laughter'), Moore's *Last Rose of Summer*. Victor Hugo is represented by five pieces, Mrs Augusta Webster by two; and we have Swinburne, Aubrey de Vere, and a Japanese poet unnamed and translated from an English version. 'Myers and Mrs Webster', he explained to me, 'those were the new poets at that time. I used to go to Thacker's<sup>1</sup> and look for new books: I tried to get into the spirit of your new poetry. I translated what I found easy.'

For those who could judge, with *Sharps and Flats* a whole crowd of new things entered Indian poetry, many of them as beautiful as they were new. The greater part of the book he allowed to stand, omitting a few purely personal letters to his niece Indira and some bitter satires on the neo-Hindus.

*The Play of Illusion*, a short musical drama, belongs to this period. Some of its songs are well-known, and it became popular for amateur performances. Like *The Genius of Vālmiki*, it has a chorus, again (but even more so) unmistakably akin to English elves. They are 'Maids of Illusion'—shall we say 'Mist-Maidens'? They introduce the play:

<i>All.</i>	Illusion's net we weave in endless wise.
<i>First Mist-Maiden.</i>	We build up dreams, filling the drowsy eyes,
<i>Second Mist-Maiden.</i>	In the secret heart the couch of Fraud we spread,
<i>Third Mist-Maiden.</i>	With the spring breeze we fan to billowing head Waves of Intoxication.

<sup>1</sup> In Calcutta.

These Mist-Maidens chime in at intervals, observing in differing phrase 'Lord! what fools these mortals be!' The drama's plot is thin and will not be summarized here.

*The Play of Illusion* kept a place in its creator's affection, for other reasons than its literary merit. He tells us that to it and *The Genius of Vālmiki* went a rapture of inspiration that he gave to no other works. The Tagore's house had always been a centre of music. The poet was a famous singer among his own people, and also a famous composer. Speaking of *The Play of Illusion*, he expressed to me a perplexity and a disappointment that went very deep with him.

I have introduced some new element in our music, I know. I have composed five hundred new tunes, perhaps more. This is a parallel growth to my poetry. Anyhow, I love this aspect of my activity. I get lost in my songs, and then I think that these are my best work; I get quite intoxicated. I often feel that, if all my poetry is forgotten, my songs will live with my countrymen, and have a permanent place. I have very deep delight in them. But—very sadly—

it is nonsense to say that music is a universal language. I should like my music to find acceptance, but I know this cannot be, at least not till the West has had time to study and learn to appreciate our music. All the same, I know the artistic value of my songs. They have great beauty. Though they will not be known outside my province, and much of my work will be gradually lost, I leave them as a legacy. My own countrymen do not understand. But they will. They are real songs, songs for all seasons and occasions. In my hymns, my *Brāhmasangit*, I have adapted and taken wholesale older tunes from Tansen,<sup>1</sup> the best of our composers; in these, I have used orthodox forms. But for my own songs I have invented very freely.

*Sharps and Flats* and *The Play of Illusion* bring us to the close of his twenty-fifth year. His first great sorrow had come to him, in the death of his older brother Jyotirindra's wife. Her companionship and sympathy had meant everything to him, and had given him what no man could have done. His references, in his *Reminiscences*,<sup>2</sup> are veiled, but show how heavy the loss was.

<sup>1</sup> Of Akbar's court; a Hindu who became a Musalman.

<sup>2</sup> p. 258.



The acquaintance which I made with Death at the age of twenty-four was a permanent one, and its blow has continued to add itself to each succeeding bereavement in an ever-lengthening chain of tears. . . . The terrible darkness which was disclosed to me through this rent—

i.e., in the smooth outward surface of life—

continued to attract me night and day as time went on.

From now onwards, the thought of death is very present in his poetry, and the constant realization of the passing nature of all we see and hear and are adds a melancholy clangour to many a passage. His *Reminiscences* stop short at this period. Everything—his outward way of life, his environment, his attitude of mind—had changed, and he was entering on his period of maturity.

*BOOK II*

1887—1897

THE SHILEIDA AND *SĀDHANĀ* PERIOD





## MATURITY

RABINDRANATH loved solitude passionately and deeply, yet in periods, which must not be too long continued. Every spell of seclusion was followed by an energetic burst into the life of the world without ; every period of public activity by a flight to solitude. His friends learnt to diagnose pretty accurately by the symptoms the imminence of a change from one course of life to the other. The change, when it came, comes with the suddenness of a flood or snowslip ; but it did not come without premonition.

This duality of longing showed early. Towards the end of the eighties, he made the experiment of absolute retirement to Ghazipur, in the United Provinces, famed for its roses. Here he built a bungalow ; and,

with a loaf of bread beneath the bough,  
A flask of wine, a book of verse,

with his wife and manuscripts, with Sarasvati singing beside him in the wilderness, the south wind shedding the rose-petals softly about him, he was going to be sheer poet,

the world forgetting, by the world forgot.

The sojourn was brief but very fruitful, much of *Mānasi* being written in it. But his mind was too quick, too interested, for the experiment to last. He fled from his rose-gardens as precipitately as, later, he was to flee from the tumults of his own countrymen in political revolt or from interviewers during his American tour.

*Mānasi* was published in 1891. For the first time, his poems are dated ; they all fall into the years 1887-1890. The prevailing note of the book is quiet certainty ; it marks his definite attainment of maturity. He was never to cease from experiment, in the attempt to enlarge his own range and that of his tongue. But after *Mānasi* he



was master of a sure style. The metres owe much to English stanza-forms; and he is master of the ode, as it had been written by Keats, with consummate interweaving of line and rhyme. Presently, in *Chitrā*, he was to make wonderful use of the form. One difference is to be noted: Bengali admits of internal rhymes far more than English does, with far less liability to loss of dignity. But, otherwise, English mediums are adapted with fidelity and skill.

Several pieces in *Mānasi* recall India's great literary past, in deliberately sanskritized diction, which gives a dignity such as Wordsworth's *Laodameia* achieves by latinized diction. One of these, *The Cloud-Messenger*, shows how greatly he had advanced in self-confidence. He greets Jayadeva,<sup>1</sup> dead these seven centuries, as only one conscious that he was in the great succession of authentic poets could do:

At India's eastern end  
I sit today, where in our green Bengal  
Once, on a day of heavy showers' downfall,  
The poet Jayadeva saw, at edge  
Of the world's rim, the emerald shadows fled  
The *tamāl*-jungle, and the sky's skirt filled  
With vapours.

More significant still, the poem is his first tribute to Kalidasa. As Dante looked across the centuries and hailed Virgil as master, as Spenser overlooked two hundred years of poetical fumbling and claimed the succession to Chaucer, as Milton in his turn saluted his 'master Spenser', so Rabindranath turned back to Kalidasa. After this, he is to pay such homage often, glad of every chance to acknowledge so dear an allegiance. This first tribute has the impressive charm of confidence. The poet, aged twenty-nine, knows that he is India's greatest poet since Kalidasa. If the dead know of such things, the great spirit honoured by this splendid tribute must have been gladdened. Rabindranath imagines the day of the Rains, in far-off Ujjain, when all the unfruitful storms of ages found consummation at last, in India's greatest lyric:

<sup>1</sup> Author of the *Gita Govinda*.

That day who knows what congregated cloud,  
 What lightning-festival, what thunders loud,  
 What maddened race of tempest gathered o'er  
 Ujjain's proud palace-crests ! The dreadful roar  
 Of struggling clouds waked of a thousand Rains  
 The vaporous restless-stirring hidden pains  
 Of desolation—wakened in one day  
 Their secret weeping ! Tearing Time's veil away,  
 That day the heavy rains poured ceaselessly,  
 As though the griefs of all eternity  
 Would soak thy mighty verses !

The reader must keep his gaze on Kalidasa's poem, as Rabindranath never ceases to do for a moment.

The poem is written on the first day of the Rains, and in it is the fitful turbulence of the storm and swift-sweeping walls of water that move across an Indian landscape :

Today the sky is dark, with pouring rain :  
 A dire wind sweeps : beneath its dreadful flail,  
 With lifted hands the forests sob and wail :  
 The lightning rips the clouds, it peeps and peers,  
 Hurling through empty space its crooked spears  
 Of sharp-edged laughter.

In my closed dim room  
 I read the *Meghdut* ; on the cloudrack's spume  
 My mind, in freedom wandering far from home,  
 Is flying from land to land.

The later half of the poem is a succession of fine scenes, those of the original *Meghaduta*, tracing that immortal cloud's passage across India.

The greatest poem in *Mānasi* is *Ahalyā* ; I do not think he ever wrote a greater, at this or at any time. He published a mutilated paraphrase in English. The poem is extraordinarily subtle—profound philosophical thought burns like a slow fire in the steady, brooding lines. It is full of guesses, some of which science has already proved true, and others of which it may prove true hereafter ; Rabindranath's 'interpenetrative power' attains its greatest triumph. Crowning this perfection is his tolerance, a sympathy like



that of Earth herself, whose Maker sends His rain on the just and the unjust. This gives a glimmering beauty to that finish, where Ahalya's eyes slowly open to the dawn of a new forgiven life. The poem is representative of Rabindranath's intellectual power and range, in its strange deep crooked thought, its unification of man and nature, its sympathy with all the dim stirrings of hidden life.

Ahalya, along with the god Indra, her partner in intrigue, was cursed by her husband ; she became a stone till the feet of Rama touched her, restoring her to consciousness. Rabindranath recreates what one must call her mental experience in her age-long apathy. Even in rocks may be vague movements of life, and the poet feels that the dumb figure remained not unknowing of earth's changes and the swift dance of the seasons. There Ahalya lay,

In that hid chamber where the Mother dwells,  
Behind her painted variegated screen,  
Shut close, by tangled flowers and leafage green,  
Her curtain never pierced by rays of morn,  
Crowding her children's homes with wealth of corn,  
With life, with youth, silently, silently !

The 'Mother' here is Annapurna, 'the Giver of Nourishment', the Indian Demeter ; and this passage is the first draft of one of the finest things in his volume, *Chitrā*.<sup>1</sup>

*Now ; and Then* attains a fine effect of dripping desolation. It resembles his *Cloud-Messenger* in recalling scenes made famous by old poets :

The storm has loosed its cloudy tresses ;  
All the day is shadowed deep, and noon sends out no heat ;  
A richer green the wood's green line possesses.

My mind recalls, on such a day  
Radhika the maid with love sought out her lord's retreat—  
Ah, when I know not, nor how far away !

He sketches for us the traveller's wife scanning the empty path for her husband ; the banished Yaksha's<sup>2</sup> wife and her grief ; all sorrowful ones who have peered into a rain-swept world of storm.

<sup>1</sup> *Evening*.

<sup>2</sup> See Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*.

*Mānasi* abounds in splendid pictures. *The Kōkīl's Call*, in its masterly opening, for representation of the tense tremors of noon does in verse something analogous to Wagner's 'fire-music', with its rendering of quivering flames in sound. The piece does not forget men and women, but brings them in with rich sympathy; it ends with one of his restful pictures of the far past. That soothing sound which fills an Indian day's quietness sounded also in *Sakuntala's* ears, in her forest-garden; as Keats's nightingale's song

found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth.

This the poet remembers as he looks out, and watches men and women, his own flesh and blood, busied in their toil. The bird's steady call becomes the lute of some unseen *Sarasvati*, a Song-Queen beguiling with music her immortal beauty of youth, as she sits unseen among the leaves.

Of the quieter pictures, none is more masterly than *Expectation*. All the peace of evening pervades these closely-touched-in scenes.

The day has gone, yet afternoon does not go. The sun, a weary picture at close of day, can nowise bring himself to go. He gazes on the earth, but would not say farewell.

The day lingers, one with the clouds and fields. It lies on the tree-tops at rest, it trembles in the waters of the stream. It stands with its long shadow spread over the bathing-*ghāts* and the pathways.

Still in its tree the dove calls, sending abroad its plaintive monotone. All the dragging day it sat alone, in idle wretchedness, and even now its chant of desolation has not ceased.

See, the women have gone down to the *ghāts*, yet even now the shadows have not fallen. Ripples break against their pots, and the massed splendour flashes, while the weary wind kisses the water's edge.

Now at day's end, has not she too, her blue raiment wrapping her limbs, come down to the lonely water, in the solitary flower-garden wall-enclosed and covered with shadow? . . .

Her garments rest carelessly on the steps in the water. Half a

† The hawk-cuckoo.



body and half a shadow, she casts an illusion on the water, as if the body's shadow mocked the body.

The flowering mango-grove sheds its rich fragrance along the bank. On a secret bough the lonely bird wails to itself. The helpless *bakul*-blossom droops, and falls on the water.

Day slowly finishes, and the light fades. On the horizon, the line of close dense woods looms black like a brow above a drowsy eye.

But *Mānasi*—‘she who is in the mind’, ‘the mind’s embodiment’—has other work than pictorial. There is the usual handful of perfect love-lyrics: ‘Explain before you go’:

Ah, make all clear before you go !

The word your flute was fain

To utter, oh, make plain !

Nay, if there was nought to say,

Wherefore look, and go away ?

and *The Dread* :

Who can say if this be well ?

There were sun and stars in my radiant skies ;

Today you alone are the light of my eyes !

Who can say if this be well ?

Beauty, its myriad shapes assuming,

Varying bliss, fair, shining faces,—

Ever-new flowers at my door were blooming !

My mind had a home in a hundred places,

In tiny hopes and loves abiding !

Sky and earth enclosed me round !

Where are they now ? They are nowhere found.

All that I had in you is hiding !

Who can say if this be well ?

This trembling heart by your side would keep.

Day and night I wake, and fugitive sleep

No longer visits these vigilant eyes.

My songs, my life, I have given away

To you, my all in the world today.

Yet, if getting all, you go from me,

Unsatisfied still, then this earth, your throne,

In a trice will blank and empty be,—

Death's black frame will remain alone !

Who can say if this be well ?

In discussing his dramas Browning will be mentioned. At this time, his influence is considerable in Rabindranath's work ; and in the lyric just quoted there is a hint of the writer of 'Escape me ?'

I close this consideration of the more poetical poems of *Mānasi* with *Sea-Waves*. The reader may care to compare it with *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. Its occasion was the loss of a pilgrim-ship carrying eight hundred passengers to Puri in 1887. All the stanzas, except the sixth, are of eleven lines. In translation, it is impossible to do more than indicate the general outline of form :

On the breast of the shoreless sea Destruction swings and  
     sweeps,  
     In dreadful festival.  
 The indomitable wind is roaming, ungovernable in strength,  
     Beating its thousand wings.  
 Sky and sea in one are reeling together in vast confusion ;  
     Darkness veils the eyes of the universe.  
 The lightning flashes and threatens, the foam-fields hiss,  
     The sharp white terrible mirth of brute Nature.  
 Eyeless earless houseless loveless,  
     The mad Forces of Evil  
     Rush to ruin, without direction, they have cast off all  
     restraints.

Mingling all horizons in confusion, the azure ocean grows dark ;  
     It weeps, it roars.  
 In anger, in fear, with sobbing, with thunders and awful  
     laughter,  
     With maddened bellows,  
 It bursts and foams, shatters and scatters in seethe,  
     Vainly rushes to find its shores.  
 It is as if Vasuki,<sup>1</sup> flinging down the earth, is playing,  
     Expanding his thousand hoods, swingeing his folds ;  
 As if the Night has become a vast water, a swaying horror,  
     Shaking the ten directions,  
     Tearing the web of its own curtain of sleep.

<sup>1</sup> The serpent who upholds the earth.



There is neither rhythm nor metre. It is the meaningless  
joyless

Dance of brute Nature.

Incarnate in a thousand shapes, is mighty Death

Dancing there ?

Water, vapour, thunder, and wind, have found blind forms of  
being,

Are vaguely pulling the nerves of their new life.

Nothing they know of direction, of hindrance or let !

Afraid of themselves, they rush to ruin.

See, in the midst, eight hundred men and women

Are staring in front of them,

Embracing, standing heart to heart !

Lifting the ship, the Storm, an ogress, shouts .

‘ Give ! give ! give ! ’

The sea, one massed foam, clamours with its million upthrust  
arms,

‘ Give ! give ! give ! ’

Wrathful at the delay, foaming and hissing,

The azure Death grows white with mighty anger.

The tiny bark cannot bear the great weight,

Its iron breast will burst !

Above and Below have become one, they seize this tiny toy,

Seize it for their sport !

The pilot stands in the bows.

Men and women, trembling, call on God :

‘ O God ! ’

‘ Be pitiful ! ’ ‘ Be pitiful ! ’ the anguished cry arises :

‘ Save our lives, save us ! ’

Where is our familiar sun ? Where moon and stars ?

Where our joy and trust, the lap of earth ?

Where are our homes, our lifelong delight ?

This is the malignant sport of a demon-stepmother !

Wherever we look, we see nothing familiar,

Nothing of our own—

Only a thousand dreadful faces, a thousand dreadful forms !

O God, Thou art not ! Pity is not ! Life is not !

There is only the sport of Nature !

Seeing the terror, the infant is frightened, and screams and  
wails ;

The piteous cry is stilled in a moment !

In the twinkling of an eye it ended ! None could see  
When life was, and when life finished !

It was as if in one gust a hundred lamps  
Went out in unison !

In a thousand homes happiness was suddenly quenched.

This brute Madness knows not others' anguish !  
Knows not itself !

Why in its midst was the mind of man placed,  
So loving, so weighed with suffering ?

Why is the mother here ? And the infant who looks in her face ?  
Why does brother clasp brother, and fall on his breast ?

In the sweet rays of the sun, in how much affection

They played together, sharing what joy, what sorrow !

Why do tears tremble in their eyes ?

O piteous hope !

Terrified love shakes like the flame of a lamp !

Dandled on such a lap of tempest, how can men

Rock fearless ?

Why has not the Demon Death devoured all hope,

All happiness ?

The mother leaps to destruction ! Why to her breast

Does she still clasp her child ?

She runs to meet death ! Yet even there she will not  
surrender it !

Convulsively she clutches her heart's wealth.

On the one side stand arrayed sea and sky,

On the other stands a woman !

Who shall separate her helpless infant from her ?

Whence gained she such strength ? See how the child of her breast

She holds to her !

In the cruel stream of brute Nature, into the heart of man

Whence came such love ?

This mother-love, which never knows despair, which will not  
acknowledge peril,

Eternally new with draughts of the nectar of life—

That nook of the universe which, though but for a moment,  
has known it—

Can that itself be without the yearnings of a mother ?

Into the heart of this storm, in the weak breast of a mother,

Has come Love that conquers Death !

Is there no Fulness of Love which has wakened this love ?



Jostling together, in the one place, are mercy and mercilessness !  
A corroding doubt !

Mighty distrust, mighty hope, are comrades ;

They have built their nests together.

Which is the true, which the false, this questioning day and  
night man's heart

Agitates, now exalting, now dashing down.

The strength of the storm-devils strikes it, yet it ignores  
anguish.

Love comes, and draws to the breast, banishing all fear.

Of two Gods is this the eternal double sport,

Breaking and building ?

Ever unendingly, victory ever, and ever defeat ?

This is the grandest sea-storm he ever did. There is wonderful sea-music and imagery here, the very sweep and rush of the tempest. In the opening stanzas, the lines swell up and crash like waves, and the black clouds and fierce winds are living things, blotting all hope and light. No translation can ever suggest the sound and surge of stanzas in which a great poet, with his imagination tense and creative, uses to the full all the onomatopœic wealth of even Bengali. The climax is reached in the great lines of the fourth stanza, where the storm-fiends clamour savagely, 'Give ! give ! give !' and the baffled Sea grows white with rage. The fifth stanza drops somewhat, by a rhetorical device too common in his work, the asking of second-rate or useless questions. I submit that the reflective part of this poem is below the descriptive. I am not blind to the grandeur of the vision of human love, defiant in its impotence and raising its *Quis separabit* in the very teeth of the triumphant cruelty of Nature. But the poet has succeeded so completely in putting before us the appalling situation that all comment is felt as an irrelevance ; we want no expression for our distress. The poem is magnificent, both in imaginative presentation and in pity, and no stanza is without unforgettable touches ; the hundred lives going out like a hundred wicks in one sudden rush of wind—love trembling like the flame of a lamp.

## POEMS ON SOCIAL PROBLEMS

If we read only such poems as *Sea-Waves* and *Expectation*, we should form a very untrue conception of his mind at this time. I have reserved, for consideration in this chapter, the political and social poems of *Mānasi*. Social abuses had already drawn him into controversy, and a tractate on *Hindu Marriage*, in 1887, aroused great anger. During his Ghazipur sojourn he was watching the world closely. *Mānasi*, as a result, contains a remarkable group of poems which are fiercely concerned with the political and social thought of Bengal. No poet has ever written more ferociously of his own people, and it is no marvel that the music-hall patriot, who is as common in India as anywhere else, received a shock. Rabindranath's independence of thought and attitude constitute not his least claim to a place among great men and great poets.

The circumstances of the time made his attitude the more courageous. The first criticisms of Hindu customs, those made by Rammohan Roy and Derozio's school, had died down; the counter-movement in religion led by the poet's own father had checked foreign influence, especially Christian influence. A vigorous national literature had followed, and had fostered two strong, indeed passionate, schools of thought. One was patriotic, the other was a sweeping revival of old Hinduism and an organized and elaborate defence of it. National pride had been encouraged by the new theories which ascribed an 'Aryan' source to European civilization; and a remarkable man called Sasadhar Tarkachuramani was teaching that Hindu superstitions and customs were subtle expressions of the profoundest scientific knowledge. Thus, the *tiki* or tuft of hair worn by orthodox Hindus had a purpose—for had we not rediscovered what the ancient Hindus must have



known all the time, that hair was highly charged with electricity? Europe had a superiority in brute force, in crude materialism; but its thought and religion, its languages, yes, even its science—so Pandit Sasadhar now showed—were borrowed from India. Bankim Chatterji once persuaded Rabindranath to listen to this interpreter of ancient times. He went doubtfully, and listened in utter amazement: 'There is no one in all the world with whom it is so difficult to sympathize as with the narrower fanatics of our own particular faith.' There was no hesitation about the stand he took. He who had been for a decade recognized as the most eminent of the younger literary men confronted his own friends and people. He was 'unpatriotic'—he criticized his own nation, instead of arousing loud cheers by attacking other nations. He proved himself a bad 'Aryan', exposing what seemed to him the evils of his own civilization. The courage he displayed throughout his long public career has never been adequately recognized. This courage found striking manifestation in *Mānasi*. One of his countrymen has observed to me that 'his criticism of the mild Bengali is sometimes almost savage'. There is no 'almost' about it. *Wild Hopes*, the best of this early group of political pieces, unlike most of them is poetry as well as biting satire. His scorn has wings, has sweep and vigour.

When mad hopes hiss like a snake in the breast, with vain rage stamping in the bonds of fate let us compose ourselves, with great care set the hookahs out, shuffle the filthy cards vigorously, and sit down to play! Let us huddle together on a bed, a dozen of us at a time, the rice-eating milk-drinking race of Bengalis!

The lash plies mercilessly for another stanza, then comes the outburst:

Rather than this, O that I might be an Arab Bedouin! Beneath my feet the boundless desert, melting into the horizon! My horse gallops, the sand flies! Pouring my stream of life into the sky, day and night I go with fire burning in my heart! My spear in my hand, courage in my heart, always homeless! Free of restraint as the

<sup>1</sup> Lord Morley, *Miscellanies* I, p. 48.

desert wind in its blowing ! My blood swells as I leap into peril !  
Life tingles throughout my whole body, my whole mind !

He returns to the contrast, which is close beside him :

With face smile-wreathed in happiness of slavery, with palms obsequiously joined, let your body writhe at your master's foot, in ecstasy at his caress ! Rolling before his shoes, pick up bread buttered with contempt, fill your fist greedily and go home ! There sit and brag of your ancestors, brag that the whole world trembles with dread of the Aryan might and pride !

The theme of *Wild Hopes* is elaborated with bitter sarcasm in *Improving Our Country*. He cheers on the heroes whose battle is oratory and journalism.

Come on, fill up your quires of paper ! That is the way to learn to fight ! Always keep pen and ink handy !

*Heroes of Bengal* satirizes the lazy, pampered student, spectacled and lolling against a chair, who knows all about Western history and chatters boastfully.

In a side-room of the house Bhulu Babu is memorizing multiplication tables in a loud voice. We two brothers are leaning against a chair in great bliss, with a history in our hands. On the table a kerosene lamp is burning. We have read three chapters. *Dādā*<sup>1</sup> is an M.A., I a B.A. As we read, the oil gets used up. Wisdom sprouts in our brains, as we learn how the hero Cromwell tumbled his king's head down, as a boy with the blow of a stick sends ripe mangoes flying.

They read further, these two students, how

some gave up their lives for religion's sake, some for the sake of others, some perished in battle—it is all printed in the book. We read all this, lolling blissfully against the chair. How knowledge grows as we read !

From reading the students pass to discussion.

In what respect are we inferior to the English ? It is a great error to say that we are inferior to them. We differ merely in manners, customs and outward appearance. We can learn whatever

<sup>1</sup> Elder brother.



they write, and we can write it again in Bengali. . . . Max Müller has said that we are 'Aryans'. Hearing that word, we have given up all solid work and have decided that we are great people, as we lie back in ease.

They have read of Marathon and Thermopylæ, and their blood burns as they imagine themselves doing these heroic deeds. Then, with a yawn,

O, chuck the Battle of Naseby ! Cromwell, you are immortal ! However, let's stop here, my head's aching, my mind's fagged. Where's that maid gone ? Here, fetch some sago ! O, come in, Nani Babu ! Come in, come in ! Let's have the cards out, and I'll give you your revenge for yesterday !

*Dharma Prachār* or *Preaching Religion*—a Bengali friend suggests *Mission-Work* as a title—was written in 1888, after a cowardly assault by young 'Aryans' on a Salvationist. At that time, the Salvation Army adopted not only Indian standards of life, but the dress of sannyasis. The policy was later modified ; while it lasted it cost many generous lives, needlessly sacrificed. Yet, after this poem, the Army may well feel that the deaths were not in vain, and that at least one Indian was brought to see the reality of the religion which called them forth. The poem flames with contempt, so unutterable that it uses an almost comic metre, expressing itself in snatches of bitter laughter :

Listen, Brother Bisu ! 'Victory to Jesu !'  
 We, the Aryan race, shall we hear that name ?  
 Vishnu to our aid ! Let the plague be stayed !  
 If they call on Jesus, gone is India's fame !  
 Every saint and sage weeps and dies in rage !  
 Where's our mighty *karma* ? Where the eternal *dharmā* ?  
 Rumour of our Vedas surely late we heard ?  
 Brothers, cease to drowse ! Anger's fires arouse !  
 Aryans to the rescue ! Save the Sacred Word !  
 Tuck your shirts up ! Quick ! Each man, get a stick !  
 Up with Hinduism ! Down the Christian's creed !  
 Bhaja gone ? Too bad ! He's the very lad !

\* These terms are too familiar to call for explanation.

Pious ! With him we were a host indeed !  
 Mono, Bhuto, haste ! Get your shoes laced !  
 If we find a chance, we'll kick that padre swine !  
 Clap ! Then insult bawl ! If he's calm through all,  
 Let a score (or more) Bengali lads combine !  
 Trip him, push him flat ! I'll snatch his hat—  
 Half-a-dozen then down him in the scuffle !  
 Whip your scissors out, slash his hair about,  
 Wrench his buttons off, snip his clothes, and ruffle !  
 Gird your loins up, clench your fists ! Be very strong !  
 Don't forget your sticks, boys ! Hurry ! Come along !

*(The Captain sings and hisses.)*

'How shall I assuage  
 Heart that is afire ? How express my rage ?'

*(Exeunt all, girding up their loins, lātbir<sup>2</sup> in hand, exeunt with great valour.)*

*Scene 2.* (Bisu, Haru, Mono, Bhuto, and the rest assemble. In the saffron robe of an ascetic, with bare feet, enter a preacher of the Salvation Army.)

*The Preacher.*

Blessed be Thy love, blessed be Thy Name !  
 Build Thy Kingdom, Lord, the New Jerusalem !<sup>3</sup>  
 From Thy world let hatred, rage and malice go !  
 Wipe the mourners' eyes, banish death and woe !  
 Unto souls athirst the living water give !  
 Loving Jesus, in Thy grace let sinners live !

*The Captain of the Band.*

That's the fellow, Bisu ! But . . . where are his shoes ?  
 He's English, right enough ! But how my fears I lose,  
 At sight of such a dress !

*The Preacher.*

Lord, these cruel, cold,  
 Loveless hearts of ours with Thy great Love enfold !  
 I am helpless, weak . . .

<sup>2</sup> A snatch of a vulgar love-song.      <sup>3</sup> Clubs.

<sup>3</sup> *Jerusalem* and *Name* rhyme in the Bengali.



*The Patriot-Band.*

The name of *Krishna* shout :  
 Chuck your talk of *Christ* ! Quick, friend ! Right about !  
 Let us see your back ! If you stop, you'll call  
*Hari*<sup>2</sup> *Krishna* ! Come ! *Hari, Hari*, bawl !

*The Preacher.*

Since thou hast borne it, Lord, all pain and loss  
 Thy slave can bear ! I take Thy heavy cross—  
 (' O bravo, bravo, friend ! ' ) Send grief and pain,  
 And with my tears wipe out some sinner's stain !  
 Life for their life I'll give—at Thy command,  
 Dear Lord, I left my friends and native land !  
 All that I loved for Thy great love I left,  
 Of comradeship, of woman's love bereft ;  
 Comfort and sweet society forsook,  
 When Thy dear vow upon my head I took !  
 Not yet forgotten, still at whiles they wake,  
 And old ties draw me homeward for their sake !  
 Yet, if I once gaze on Thy blood-stained face,  
 Before that Love, of alien land or race  
 All thought is killed, there is no mine or theirs !  
 This foolish heart, with all its silly cares,  
 Lord, let Thy Love shut round ! These who have come  
 With poison, send them hence with nectar home !  
 Their sinful hearts draw to Thy heart ! Arise,  
 Light of God's Love ! Shine on these hate-filled eyes !

*The Patriot-Band.*

I can stand no more ! My Aryan blood's ablaze !  
 Haru, Madhu, beat him ! Boys, our *lāthis* raise !  
 If you'd save your skin, *Krishna*'s name proclaim !

*The Preacher.*

Gracious Jesus Christ, blessed be Thy Name !

*The Patriot-Band.*

Gird your loins up ! Hit him ! Knock the Christian down !  
 Protect our Hindu faith, our Aryan land's renown !

(They beat the preacher on the head. His head bursts, and blood runs. Wiping away the blood, he says)

My Master give you peace, His grace afford !  
 I am but His poor slave, He the world's Lord !

<sup>2</sup> A name of Vishnu, usually applied to Krishna.

*The Patriot-Band* (very excited).

Goodness ! Sibū ! Haru ! Look out, Nani ! Charu !  
 'Tis no time for fooling ! Have you got no fear ?  
 The police are coming ! I can see them near,  
 Brandishing their batons ! Run like streaks of flame !  
 Blessed be the Aryan Faith ! Blessed Krishna's Name !

(They go very hastily.)

As a picture of concentrated caddishness, this is unrivalled. The caution of the patriots till they are certain that the preacher—one man against many—is not going to attempt to defend himself, their sudden access of courage on seeing the very things which should have won their respect, his bare feet and saffron garb, their land's time-honoured signs of dedication and meekness—their rapid flight—all this, in the first edition, has an even more savage crowning stroke. They arrive home, full of shouting brag at their great 'victory', and in their anger because food is not immediately ready for their Aryan greatnesses they beat and kick wives who so little know how to serve such hero-husbands. In later editions, the poet remitted this part of the castigation.

*Dharma Prachār* is noteworthy for its sympathetic presentment both of the missionary and of the religion he teaches. After the English *Gītānjali* was published, there was much discussion of the supposed influence of Christianity on his work. In my opinion, the direct influence was very slight, and his attitude towards Christian doctrine was hardly friendly. He seems to have made no direct study of the New Testament. *Dharma Prachār* is almost alone in its understanding treatment of teaching in which he does not share belief. A magistrate proscribed the poem, when it first appeared, as seditious, and likely to bring the Government into contempt !

But his most flaming anger is reserved for child marriage. *Deserted* is a dignified remonstrance to one who has turned to lead reaction, after teaching lofty doctrine, and who now mocks at what he had introduced. It contains these terrible words :



Playing our flutes, let us bring home a bride of eight years. Let us snatch and tear open the bud of childhood, let us force out the sweet of youth! Pressing a weight of Scriptures on the new expanding life, let us make it one with the dust of the wrinkled ages!

But, the poem proudly insists, reaction is sure of failure. For the lost leader, well, 'your own teaching will save us from these words of yours'. *Loving Conversation of a Newly-Wedded Bengali Couple* is a further contemptuous commentary on this wedding of age and babyhood:

*Scene 1, The Bedroom, the First Night.*

*The Husband.*

Where can any bliss be found like ours, in this first meeting of life with life? Come, forgetting everything else, today let us two simply gaze at each other! Our hearts have come together in one place, full of bashfulness and modesty. It is as if in one fascination we two have forgotten ourselves, and are sucking honey from one flower! My heart, burning in the fires of loneliness all life long, has become cinders! I have come to refresh myself in the shoreless sea of your love! Say but once, 'I am yours, and except you I desire nothing else'. But . . . but . . . but . . . what is this? Why do you rise to leave me? Where are you going, sweetheart?

*The Bride (weeping).*

I am going to sleep with my nurse.

The enamoured husband tries again, two days later. With high-flown phrases of worship, he asks his girl-wife why she is weeping in a corner. She replies, 'I left my pussy Meni at home'. Another day passes, and he finds her in the inner garden; to his wasted raptures—'Whose name are the restless bees humming? With eyes full of laughter, your mind happily agitated with joyous memories, in this lonely grove, this bowery shelter, what are you doing?'—she says, 'I am eating wild plums'. He says he has come to serve her, and asks how he can do this. She asks for another handful of plums. In his courtliest strain of extravagance, he announces that he is going, and he wonders how she will beguile the heavy sorrow of his absence. She says, 'I will play at marriage with my dolls'.

These poems showed extraordinary courage and made a deep impression. Some of our admiration must be given also to his own nation, who allowed such frankness of criticism. Indians are as capable of ruthless examination of the faults of their own civilization as Europeans and Americans are. This has been shown by very many, from the time of Rammohan Roy to that of Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. It is one sign of greatness when a nation produces outstanding men and women, but it is an even greater sign when it shows willingness to listen to blame as well as praise.

But Rabindranath's contribution to the positive side of the problem does not take us far as yet, if such poems as *A Woman to a Man* and *The Man's Reply* give his own solution. Marriage is represented as having reached a stage where the husband takes the wife for granted. She is weeping and unsatisfied. She remembers the time when her presence thrilled and intoxicated; now she is offered . . . kindness! Her husband is bewildered at her refusal to be satisfied with it.

Why my heart is breaking, why I weep—

Even yet can you not understand?

Will much talking tell you? No, I wipe my eyes.

These are tears and not reproach—just tears!

The man's reply has an appearance of reasonableness so far as everything except the disappointment of the woman's heart is concerned. He points out that at first they had known nothing about themselves, about each other, or about what life was going to mean. Each had intoxicated the other, and all questionings had been put by.

Slowly then came joy's satiety:

Underneath the flowery shade

We stirred Enchantment's Lake, its lotus tearing—

Even mud is pleasant, in the guise of play.

He insists that even now sometimes the old ecstasy wakens, and he comes to her with flaming heart: but he finds his goddess weeping! So the message of the spring moonlight



and the south wind shrivels, and he grows cold again. He concludes by advising acceptance of what is possible :

Let us two share joy and grief together—

Enough of offering flowers to a goddess.

These two poems are regarded as remarkable : and they certainly struck a new note in Bengali literature. I have never been convinced that in them the poet meant to do more than set out two sides, without passing a judgement on either ; yet in the second poem's conclusion one cannot quite escape the suspicion that he is still far from understanding or sharing what the best modern thought feels passionately about the ideal relationship between man and woman. I quote a criticism which has been given me, and with which I associate myself :

Woman's attraction in the first phase is represented as merely physical—it is two bodies that attract each other, not two souls. There is no flashing sympathy, no understanding, no subtle alliance. Lacking these, love is 'mud', for the bodily love does not come as the irresistible climax of spiritual union and of all the electric forces of two inter-playing *spirits*. That is possible only where men's and women's minds are full of other interests than sex, where a man and woman turn to each other because of subtle ties in these interests and in their own complex characters. It happens only when there is the possibility of being understood fully by someone else, of having one's nature—in its depths of blind emotion, in its hints and suggestions of mystery, in its haunting elusiveness—developed and strengthened and made clear and powerful by the love of another character as subtle and complex, and sympathetic to the point of oneness. This gives adventure to what otherwise is dull, is even 'mud'. When a woman's love is obtained so easily, as a mere matter of arrangement, you will have such poems as *A Woman to a Man* and *The Man's Reply* regarded as daring and new.

It will be remembered that his address on *Hindu Marriage* was delivered in 1887, the year of the earliest poems of *Mānasi*. Forty years later, Bengali novels were still monotonous with their one theme, the marriage system, and the social plays, obsessed with it, were as dull as European and American 'thrilling' cinema 'stories of passion'. The sooner the question is settled, the better

for literature ! It will be interesting to see what the new India of 1950 says of the fiction of 1900 to 1925—if it has patience to read it at all. One reason for the comparative failure of Rabindranath's short stories in Europe and America is, I think, the presence among them of a few whose heroes are mawkish and unmanly. This, even more than the inequality of the stories, has lost him readers, and has caused the excellence of the best stories to be overlooked.

It is a fault which he shares, so far as it is his, with very many other writers. Why do so many Bengali novelists fail to win sympathy for their men-characters ? Their women are often wonderfully good. In fairness we must remember that men formerly accepted the fullest service from women as their right, in Europe as well as Asia. Consider, for example, the perfect caddishness of Prince Geraint, in the two *Idylls of the King* in which he appears. Some of the fierce contempt which he arouses the reader cannot help transferring to an age which found him admirable. Neither Rabindranath nor Tennyson could altogether escape from their own time. They dealt with men as they found them, as often noble yet also often spoiled and complacent. Rabindranath, at any rate, as I have shown, was nearly always far in advance of his time and people.

The devotion of Alcestis ! Assuredly the heroic unselfishness of woman is a beautiful thing ; and I warrant you that, the gods helping me, Alcestis shall take no injury from my hands. But what of Admetus as a husband ? That is an aspect of the matter upon which our hymnists and our congregations are little disposed to dwell ; and they find no difficulty in ignoring it. It belongs to the skimble-skamble thinking which aids, and is aided by faith in these monstrosities, never to see anything steadily, never to see anything whole, but only such parts as please. And your heroic tragedy is beloved for flattering this habit. But there are flatterers enough ; and for my part, I intend to give you much more of Admetus than of Alcestis. He is much better for you. You are accustomed to rest with complacency on the picture of the self-sacrificing woman as the ideal of wives. For herself she deserves such admiration, but for men and society, no ! I should like to make you feel, and I mean to try, what a blind, barbarous, self-defeating selfishness is at



the bottom of all this rapture about the devotion of women. You will say that the women join in it. But what sort of women ? . . . Your magnanimous satirists have no difficulty in directing the almost unanimous resentment of the sex against whoever dares to see and show what mischief to themselves and to us results from their ill-governed virtue not less than from their ungoverned vice. I pity Alcestis, and I pity her husband. What would she make of him ? What *does* she make of him !

## FIRST DRAMAS OF MATURITY

AFTER *Mānasi*, Rabindranath turned again to drama, writing a series of tragedies, broken by one superb romantic play in *Chitrāngadā* and one prose comedy, *Vaikuntha's Manuscript*. The latter, the first of his social comedies, appeared in 1891. Its dialogue is very witty, swift, and brief, a rollicking delightful thing. Nothing could be more unlike his previous dramas. But its excellence could not survive translation.

The series of tragedies opened with *King and Queen* and *Sacrifice*, which have both been translated by the poet. Of all his dramas, *King and Queen* is that in which he has taken the greatest liberties in translation. There is singularly little correspondence between the original and the English version, even the one or two main lines which have been kept, out of a very complex drama, being very freely handled and changed. All the abundant sub-plots have been omitted: much talk between the King and his Queen, showing the situation's development, talk between the Queen and the Minister who reveals to her the extent to which her family are draining the country, dull talk between villagers, talk among the evil members of the Queen's family—who play a far more prominent part in the original than in the translation—talk between spies and plotters, talk between the King and Queen of Kashmir, talk between the fugitive Kumarsen and the Raja of Trichur, who refuses to shelter him—all this has gone. We lose by the omission of beautiful scenes which show us more fully the Queen's character and the love between her brother and herself, and which give us a very charming picture of Ila and her love for Kumarsen. The poet has made his usual additions in translations; this, for example, is in the English only:



Only, for a moment, she checked her horse and turned her face to the temple, bowing her head low—then rode away fast as lightning. I cannot say if she had tears in her eyes. The light from the temple was dim.

The most notable thing in *King and Queen* is what has been an outstanding feature of his work, its greater success in delineating women than men. Ila is a very lovely figure, though paling out into shadow at the close, and never free from nebulosity, a nymph seen through the fountain-spray of sorrow. Her beauty, her loyalty and gentleness, these are seen. Her filmy evanishment is part of the play's scattered finish in a mixture of melodrama and fine tragedy, of carelessness and subtle art, as disordered a close as ever a good poet gave. A second female figure has drawn Rabindranath's still deeper sympathies, those sympathies which go out to women's loneliness, their great sufferings and passion. Queen Sumitra, so rarely seen yet so pervading, flashes through the tale, a queen from her noble putting by of a love which is merely selfish play and her swift riding from it, to her death. Ibsen's influence has been considerable on the younger school of Bengali writers; I cannot say if Rabindranath, in these earlier days, had read *A Doll's House*, but the resemblance between Nora and Sumitra is striking, and (I should guess) not accidental. His pre-occupation with the question of marriage, so marked in *Mānasi*, here shows on a wider field. The husband, by being lover only, has lost the wife's respect; and the callous brutality with which he vindicates his manhood, when she has fled, only loses her completely.

The play's sarcasm is bitter. The greedy horde of foreign officials battens on a starved land. 'Nothing. It is merely hunger—the vulgar horde of poverty.' 'He smiles sweetly, strokes the land on its back with his caressing hand, and whatever comes to his touch gathers with care.' It will be at once grasped that the play has a double meaning; it had a political reference, which helps to explain

<sup>1</sup> These quotations are from the poet's own translation (*Sacrifice and Other Plays*).

its very considerable measure of popularity on the stage. The Minister's reply to the King's demand that his generals turn the aliens out—'Our General himself is a foreigner'—this, repeated by the King himself, is almost the burden of the play. Later, the King of Kashmir indignantly repudiates the suggestion that his son came before Bikram's courts, to be condemned or forgiven by a 'foreigner'. Non-co-operation is here in the germ, a generation before Mr Gandhi launched it.

The colouring is sober, though it has glowing moments. Of *King and Queen*, as of his other plays, it must be said that it is a vehicle for ideas. In Rabindranath's dramas, the pressure of thought often strangles the action. Yet it is not true that his plays are not genuine drama. The drama is concentrated, living in the hearts and thoughts and words of a very few characters, sometimes one or two only. There is little differentiation of character. All the actors are pitiful at heart, lineal children of the poet who created them. I have mentioned Ibsen. Bikram, in his self-deception and his ready unquestioning acceptance of the reputation which has been invented for him by others, is strangely like an Ibsen character. He wins battles, yet loses the only campaign which matters; garland after garland, as he grasps it, crumbles to dust in his hot fingers. His shadowy beaten adversary waxes greater and greater, and wins all that the world contains worth winning. Yet the finish, which comes so near a fine success, falls short because the poet has failed to draw the King consistently. In the end, he shows himself as like his Queen, and one wonders why the action should have taken place at all.

*King and Queen* should have been Rabindranath's greatest drama, for the theme has rich possibilities. His English version, as so often—for it is critical maturity that in his translations is working over again the output of his creative youth—shows an awareness of the fact that he squandered his chances of success, and let the drama sprawl and trail through a jungle of undramatic and only secondarily relevant matter. There is a great deal of merely illustrative dialogue, parts that are just so much stage



scenery or prologue-stuff. The theme cries out for concentration. Had it received the right handling, it would have stood out far above *Sacrifice*, for the characters of both the King and Queen show unexpected powers of analysis.

That the reader may judge how mixed is the play's finish, I translate it. The sameness of style in the published English version inevitably hides the sternness of Sumitra's irony and defiance, as it does every other quality but soft beauty.

Kumarsen, seeing his subjects' sufferings in his brother-in-law's pursuit of him, has sent his head by his sister's hands to Bikram. The drama has been the vehicle for Rabindranath's scorn of governments, their wars and 'glory'; and this flames up now at the end. Kumarsen's arrival is announced, and the tyrant prepares to be magnanimous :

*Bikram (coming forward).* Come, come, my friend, come !

*(Sumitra comes out from the palanquin, carrying Kumarsen's head on a golden plate.)*<sup>1</sup>

*Bikram.* Sumitra ! Sumitra !

*Chandrasen.* Ah Mother,<sup>2</sup> what is this ? Sumitra ?

*Sumitra.*

He in whose wake you ravaged night and day,  
Through forests, tumbled rocks, and scattered wilds,  
Your realm, religion, mercy sacrificed,  
All, even the kingdom's Guardian Goddess, slighted—  
He in whose quest you filled with lamentation  
All ways that are, whose head you sought to buy—  
Take him, Great King ! This head receive, the noblest  
Of all the kingly kindreds of the world !  
With his own hand the Prince despatched this gift,  
Guest-offering for his guest ! Your mind's desire  
Is satisfied : Ah, now be quieted !  
Be quieted in this life, and let it<sup>3</sup> fly  
To flaming Hell forthwith ! Be happy, you !

<sup>1</sup> In the poet's own translation, this is 'veiled'. There is no veil in the original.

<sup>2</sup> The goddess Kali.

<sup>3</sup> The desire.

(Shouting)

Merciful Queen, the World's Life-Giver! Mother!  
Give place upon your lap!

(She falls dead. *Ila enters, running.*)

*Ila.* Oh, what is this, is this,  
Great King? My prince . . .

(She swoons.)

*Shankar (coming forward).*

My Lord, my Chief, my Child!

Than my own soul more dear, of this old heart  
Life's treasure! This was well! Oh, this was well!  
Thou hast put on thy crown, and like a king  
Hast come unto thy throne! Death's shining mark  
Has lit thy brow with everlasting glory!  
To see today thy splendour God preserved  
This aged one so long! Thou hast gone home  
To Virtue's dwelling-place! I, through all births  
Thy slave, go with thee!

*Chandrasen (flinging his crown from his head).*

Cursèd be this crown!

Cursèd this throne! (*Kicking the throne. Rebati enters.*)  
Ogress and vampire, hence!

Hence! Never show thy face to me again!  
Vile fiend!

*Rebati.* This passion will not last for ever! (*Exit.*)*Bikram. (Kneeling by Sumitra's body.)*

Goddess, I was not worthy of thy love.  
Wouldst thou not pardon therefore? Hast thou gone,  
Holding me fast in guilt for evermore?  
I would have begged thy pardon in this life,  
With tears incessant. Hast thou ta'en the chance?  
Thou, like a God, wast stern, immovable!  
Not vain thy punishment, and sentence hard!

This is melodramatic, and badly melodramatic. But so often is the Elizabethan drama, which was the Indian poet's model. But the passage attains also in some of its lines the Elizabethan passion and burning rhetoric.

The theme of *Sacrifice* had been implicit in many an obscure page of Indian religious thought. But Rabindranath's play first gave its protest a reasoned and deliberate place in art. He attacks bigotry with the



weapon most dangerous to it, the sarcasm of parody. He puts into Raghupati's mouth that specious argument, that Time is ever slaying, Nature is red in tooth and claw, and therefore the Mind that made the universe calls on us to offer up an orgy of butchery. Many must have applauded Raghupati's words, only to feel a dawning disquiet after. Conviction flares in Gobinda's words :

Sin has to ripen to its ugly fulness before it bursts and dies hideously. When King's blood is shed by a brother's hand, then lust for blood will disclose its devil's face, leaving its disguise of goddess.<sup>1</sup>

The tragedy of questioning grows.

Goddess, is there any little thing, that yet remains out of the wreck of thee ? If there be but a faintest spark of thy light in the remotest of the stars of evening, answer my cry, though thy voice be of the feeblest ! Say to me, ' Child, here I am '. No, she is nowhere. She is naught. But take pity upon Jaisingh, O Illusion, and for him become true. Art thou so irredeemably false, that not even my love can send the slightest tremor of life through thy nothingness ? O fool, for whom have you upturned your cup of life, emptying it to the last drop ? For this unanswering void—truthless, merciless, and motherless ?

Again :

Let us be fearlessly godless, and come closer to each other. They want our blood. And for this they have come down to the dust of our earth, leaving their magnificence of heaven ! For in their heaven there are no men, no creatures who can suffer.

This note of wild arraignment takes us beyond Rammohan Roy. A wind of the modern world wails through this desolation.

The desolation deepens, till the anguish attains its fiercest by laying hold of the untamable spirit of Raghupati, prisoner and brought before the King for doom. The King's dignity stands up in quiet power, as when he says, to his brother's plea for pardon :

The judge is still more bound by his laws than his prisoner.

<sup>1</sup> I use the poet's own translation.

After that brother's banishment, King and kingly rebel face each other, spirit to naked spirit. Even in translation, the page trembles with passion, in Raghupati's proud stormy words. His bitterness almost slays him, as he realizes the impotence of the idol he has served to his ruin.

Look how she stands there, the silly stone—dead, dumb, blind—the whole sorrowful world weeping at her door—the noblest hearts wrecking themselves at her stony feet!

Aghast at the permitted pain, the disciple who was as his son dead by his own folly, his own life in ruin beneath the rebellion he has raised, Raghupati learns with utter bitterness the impotence of that pitiless name which he has worshipped. But the beggar-girl, whose pet goat had been taken for Kali's service, brings to him, as to the Sannyasi in *Nature's Revenge*, the perception of what remains, better than our hopes—the warm sanctities of human love. The goddess he has done with, has hurled her image away; but this child comes to call him 'Father'. And the pair go out together.

His early plays reach their highest dramatic point in *Sacrifice*. It is worth while to consider the play a little further from the side of drama.

Its technique is very faulty. His translation, as usually, can amalgamate different scenes, omitting long intermediate passages, not only without loss but with great gain. The Shakespearean drama has bequeathed some conventions of very doubtful value, which Rabindranath took over. Thus, *Sacrifice* has two under-plots, both of which the poet has omitted from his English version. One under-plot is talk of villagers, and is supposed to supply the 'humour' and 'comic relief' that tragedy is held to require. Bucolic chatter can be very dull. The other under-plot introduces a new motive, the Queen's desire to remove Druba, the King's adopted son. This might have been built most powerfully into the plot. But it comes far too late, more than half-way through, is made little of and handled very half-heartedly; and such a motive—so powerful, if at all genuine—is not suited for a secondary



part. But the chief fault of *Sacrifice* is excessive declamation. A great deal of this the poet's maturer judgement evidently condemned, for it disappears from the English.

The characters in *Sacrifice* are irresponsible, waifs swayed by the strong wind of their creator's emotion, puppets in the grip of a fiercely-felt idea. Aparna, the beggar-girl, on whose deeds the whole plot turns, does not interest. A friend objects to this, 'She is in the background all the time, and in the original she is a lovely creation'. This does not seem to me true. If we are referred to *Pippa Passes*, the answer is that Browning's poem is a string of episodes, and not connected drama. Pippa is hardly an actor, she is a symbol, and kept in a symbol's position. It is not so with Aparna. She is not in the background. Then, the conversions are not worked out psychologically, in the case of either Jaisingh or Raghupati. Raghupati lived on the stage when the poet impersonated him; and he lives in the play precisely because he *is* the poet. In *As You Like It*, one reluctantly forgives the usurping Duke's conversion. But then, the play is a comedy; and its title, *As You Like It*. Raghupati's change—which is a later addition, no part of the first edition—is sudden and unreasonable. The play's finish is sketchy, hastily compressed, as if the poet's invention were flagging and so dropped abruptly to a fore-ordained conclusion. Yet *Sacrifice* has not only value as emotion and poetry, it has stage qualities, and can be made popular. Under the pressure of Raghupati's distress for Jaisingh, it shakes itself free from all declamation, and is altogether fine. This was felt on the Calcutta stage, when the poet himself acted the part of Raghupati. 'It was generally considered his greatest success as an actor.' How moving he could be as an actor only this generation can realize. I can only assure those who will follow us, *Vidi docentem; credite, posteris*.

## RESIDENCE AT SHILEIDA

AFTER the Ghazipur experiment palled, the poet planned to tour India on the Grand Trunk Road, by the leisurely medium of a bullock-cart. He guarded his genius as watchfully as Milton. His plan would have brought the pageant of India's varied peoples before him, unfolded richly and slowly, as he made his way from Bolpur to Peshawur. But the Maharshi had also been thinking and planning. At that time the Tagore estates were very much larger than they are now. They were chiefly in three districts: at Shileida, on the Ganges; in Orissa; and at Kaligram, in the Rajshahi district. Rabindranath's elder brother Jyotirindranath, a fiery nationalist, had been running a line of steamers for inland navigation, and had lost everything in competition with European firms. He was compelled to withdraw from business, and to relinquish all control over the family estates. Dwijendranath, the eldest brother, 'well, he is a philosopher, and we had discovered that it was useless to expect him to look after things'.<sup>1</sup> For a while, the estates were in charge of nephews; but the Maharshi from time to time suggested that Rabindranath should take over affairs, and at last became seriously annoyed. 'This isn't my business', he said. 'The property is supporting you brothers, and I am not going to be bothered with it.' When he heard of the projected bullock-cart tour, he refused to be put off any longer. Ajit Chakravarti's friendly gibe is that 'at first the poet was just a little frightened by the name of *Work*, but at last he consented'.<sup>2</sup> He proved himself a very capable manager, at a time when the estate had been getting into a bad way. He knew Shileida well already; one of

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.<sup>2</sup> *Rabindranāth*, p. 31.



his early recollections was at nine years of age accompanying Jyotirindranath when shooting there, and seeing both a tiger and a leopard.

There was a short break in his new duties, in 1891, when he re-visited England, reaching London on the 10th of September ; he was back in India on the 8th of November. *Sādhana* had been started just before he left India, and in its pages he published *A Pilgrim to Europe*, a charmingly-written diary. The visit did him no good, and did nothing to allay his restlessness or to attract him to the English people. On return, he took up the zemindari work again.

He now entered upon his happiest and most creative period, living chiefly at Shileida. Shileida is on the Padma (Lotus), the undivided Ganges before it joins the Brahmaputra and breaks into a thousand mighty waterways. It is not a widely scattered zemindari, but sufficiently scattered to entail a certain amount of leisurely travelling by boat. It is within easy reach of Calcutta ; and it gave him the rest of mind and leisure which ripened his many-sided powers. He frequently visited Kaligram, going by canal and the river, and the Orissa estates, by train to Calcutta and by canal-boat onwards. He must have spent most of his time on the water, and he learnt to feel for the Ganges even more than the Hindu's love, for he knew her moods intimately.

During these years, he was a giant, reaping his wealthy fields. Drama, every sort of poem, short story, satire, criticism, essay, abundant private correspondence, these were the sheaves he gathered. Much of all this does not deserve to perish. But at first, at any rate, he did not gather his most enduring laurels.

For these early days of freedom beside the great stream which is the very heart-blood of his land were stormy with controversy. As has been said in an earlier chapter, this was the time of the rise of neo-Hinduism, which read into the ancient Hindu scriptures a knowledge of modern science, and explained the crudest superstitions in a pseudo-scientific fashion. Its organ was the *Nabajiban*, or *New*

*Life*, castigated by Dr Seal, in his vigorous youth,<sup>1</sup> as 'this hybrid literature of impotence', 'this great sink of national imbecility', whose characteristics he finds to be 'a hopeless sterility, a blank, stunned stare, an incongruous mysticism, a jellyfish structure of brain and heart', and its motto 'Abandon Hope, all ye who enter here'. Of its attempted reconciliation of the wildest mythology with modern science, he makes the comparison with

the senseless maunderings of some Hebraising Cambro-Britons over the unintelligible and uncouth remains of Stonehenge. Babu Bankimchandra Chatterji is its head of gold, Babus Chandranath Bose and Akshaychandra Sarkar are the silver breast and arms, a Bengali journalist furnishes the brass, and the rank and file of the great army of indolent slaves to routine form the feet of clay.<sup>2</sup>

This is refreshing decision; and, indeed, the polemics of the period furnish exhilarating reading.

Rabindranath joined in the assault. In letters to Bankim,<sup>3</sup> some years earlier, he had criticized the latter's *Life of Krishna*. This of itself might not have strained matters to breaking-point. But Bankim, who was no poet,<sup>4</sup> published a volume of verses, which were handled with adequate severity in *Bhārati*, in an unsigned review, which the novelist (mistakenly) took to be by Rabindranath. It is pleasant to remember how generously and completely the quarrel was set to rest later.<sup>5</sup>

At Shileida, at first, Rabindranath on the whole left external politics alone.

I was fighting with all those people, on social and religious questions. Nabin Sen, like Bankim, preached the Krishna-cult. In fact, there was quite a controversy as to which of them really started it.<sup>6</sup>

Since it should go far to dispel the anæmic picture of the poet which prevails in the West, one may be excused for

<sup>1</sup> *New Essays in Criticism*, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Seal, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> Also, in

an article which, out of respect for Bankim's memory, is not reprinted in the poet's collected prose. Bankim, who was dying when it appeared, did not see it.

<sup>4</sup> His one remembered poem is *Bande Mātārām* ('Hail, Mother!'). Rabindranath set this to music. Bankim was very proud of the song.

<sup>5</sup> *My Reminiscences*, pp. 251-2.

<sup>6</sup> Conversation.



drawing attention here to his vigorous polemic on literary, no less than religious and social matters. Sometimes he practised a reticence as frank and cutting as any speech could have been. In at least one case, this led to another severance of relationships, deeper than that with Bankim. 'I said nothing', the poet told me. 'But he knew that I did not care for his dramas.' He was anti-theosophy also, for there was an alliance between theosophy and neo-Hinduism. Many things in popular Hinduism vexed him intensely. He always detested force in all its manifestations. Nietzsche, especially, irritated him. Saktism, the worship of *Sakti* or force, personified as one of the aspects of Kali, had no attraction for him. Upon Saktism, and the legends which cluster round the name of his countrymen's favourite goddess, he has drawn less for imagery than upon any other form of Hindu symbolism. Yet about this cult cluster scenes vigorous and awe-inspiring in the extreme, all the gloomy lonely horror of the burning-grounds, with their skulls and smouldering fires, their exultant leaping flames. It is significant that in his praise of Bengal he personifies her as Lakshmi, the gentle gracious queen of beauty and good fortune. Saktism, the cult of the capricious queen of force and destruction, he disliked intensely. His defence shows how robust his attitude was.<sup>1</sup>

I take my idea of saktism from the popular notion of it. The ideal of life which you find in Kabikankan<sup>2</sup> is very mean. When I was very young, I wrote a criticism of him which made folk very angry, and I was punished with abuse. They thought that, because I was a Brahmo, I could not enter into the spirit of these wonderful things; that I criticized as a Brahmo. But they didn't know I was not a Brahmo, practically speaking. But to return to Kabikankan. What our people felt at that time was their utter impotence in the tyranny of power and the waywardness of fate. *Sakti* tried all kinds of mean dodges to raise her favourite to the throne—to dethrone the Kalinga King, and put up another. This was delightful to people. In this lay their chance, to please this capricious goddess. That idea still lingered in our political life. Because the Kabikankan poet was a poor man, and oppressed, he dreamed of power.

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> 'Ornament of Poets', the name by which Mukundaram (16th century) was known. Tagore refers to his poem, *Chandi*.

The bitterness of helplessness has led to this adoration of conscienceless Strength in other lands than Bengal. In Bengal, in the early years of the twentieth century, some of the *swadeshi* leaders made a very determined attempt 'to transform Kali-worship into nation-worship. They were very keen on it as the symbol of Bengal'.<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath was even asked to write a hymn in furtherance of this effort.

While at Shileida, he was practically editing *Sādhana*, 'incomparably the best periodical Bengal has known'.<sup>2</sup> The nominal editor was his nephew Sudhindranath Tagore, but Rabindranath contributed more than seventy-five per cent of the whole magazine. In the fourth year, he took entire control, and edited it for a year. Then it ceased, because of financial difficulties. It was immensely popular; but so many conditions discourage the accumulation of a library in Bengal, that very few buy a book or a magazine, compared with the number that may read it. Loken Palit offered to bear part of the financial loss on *Sādhana*, but 'I got tired also. I wanted some change, and I could not go on producing regular articles, stories, and so on'.<sup>3</sup> This was in 1895.

His four years of work in *Sādhana* make a record of extraordinarily brilliant and versatile journalism. *Sādhana* had succeeded to *Bhārati* as his organ of expression. Every one of his successive cycles of activity meant a new medium. When he plunged into a new period it seemed as if his thought must have a fresh vehicle; the old was finished, so far as he was concerned. And when he used a magazine he generally filled most of it.

Now, as always, he wrote on everything under the sun. In *Sādhana*, he brought under purview the whole earth's rondure; politics, as yet mainly Indian, social questions, literature. 'He has even encroached upon the domain of economics'.<sup>4</sup> He initiated the contrast, which became popular, between ancient and modern India. The silence and splendour of the one he set against the noise and

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.<sup>2</sup> Mahalanobis.<sup>3</sup> Conversation.<sup>4</sup> Mahalanobis.



squalid aims of the other, the love of meditation against the savage crush for wealth and place. It is hard for the past to get justice from the present. Either it is despised as cruel and ignorant, or lauded as innocent and wise.

Much of his work was other than polemical. His critical work, not great in quantity, is usually very careful. Most of it was done at Shileida. He was reading widely, strengthening that catholicity of thought which posterity will see even better than we do. His intellectual powers found a congenial form of expression in *The Diary of the Five Elements*—air, earth, water, fire, and ether. Water and fire are feminine, the other three masculine; the feminine elements are inquisitive and emotional, the others conservative and stolid. ‘They represent five different points of view, five different types of personality. They discuss everything and anything. The characterization of the speakers has something dramatic in it.’ The book was a favourite with the poet, and later used as a textbook in Visvabharati,<sup>2</sup> by foreign students studying Bengali with Rabindranath.

These were years of pouring abundance, magnificently creative. All this splendid journalism was merely byplay. He was getting into the heart of his land, was learning to know the people. The Padma at his doors, he was living in the *kutibāri*, or ‘lodge’, so prominent in the letters of his time. He was storing his mind with those vast spaces which are the landscapes of his verse. It is the wide effects, the far-spreading light of evening, the moon that

with delight

Looks round her when the heavens are bare,

that fill his poetry, and make it so full of healing restfulness. The letters written at this period are packed with joy of that stately stream, its sandbanks and reedbanks, its slow-drifting sails. To this man came a period of peace as profound as Milton’s at Horton, and of far longer duration. The picture of his life is preserved very directly in his *Torn Leaves* (or, *Torn Letters*). Of these, a good many

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> The Santiniketan University.

were written to Srischandra Majumdar, but most to his niece Indira. She knew the value of this correspondence, and on his fiftieth birthday gave him a selection from his own share in it, copied out and bound. Reading again the story of his rich vanished early manhood, he was struck by its felicity of description and comment, and published a selection from the letters. Few poets can have looked back to the work of their first days without sometimes feeling that the years have taken more than they have given.

Short stories came out regularly every month for four years, beginning with *The Baby's Return*,<sup>1</sup> in November 1891. These were collected in several volumes, *Galpa Guchchha* or *Bunches of Tales*. Many have appeared in English in the volumes entitled *Hungry Stones*, *Mashi* and *Broken Ties*. Their popularity in his own land has been immense.

*Torn Letters* shows these stories in the making. We find the suggestion of many a *galpa*<sup>2</sup> in incidents told in the letters. Many a lovely flight of fancy or glimpse of landscape grows spontaneously in this delightful correspondence, ere transplanted to the only slightly more formal parterre of his stories. I will translate a passage which shows the born story-teller in process of gathering his material; he is getting to know the folk whom hitherto he has watched from aristocratic windows. The letter is dated February 1891; the Postmaster served later as lay-figure for the hero of the story so-called.

The postmaster comes in the evenings sometimes, and tells me many a story about the postal service. The post-office is on the ground floor of our estate lodge—a great convenience, for letters are received as soon as they arrive. I love to hear his tales. He has a way of relating the most impossible stuff with extreme gravity. Yesterday, he told me that the folk of these parts have such reverence for the Ganges that, if one of their relations dies, they grind his bones to powder and keep this till they meet someone who has drunk Ganges-water. To him they give it with betel, and think then that one part of their dead kinsman has made the Ganges pilgrimage.

<sup>1</sup> Translated as *My Lord the Baby*.

<sup>2</sup> Story.



I laughed, and said, 'I think that's a yarn'. After deep thought he admitted that it might be.

This passage may serve as an example of the way these charming letters have lost in the published English version. 'Has made the Ganges pilgrimage' is, literally, 'has obtained the Ganges'; whenever possible, the dying are placed in the sacred river, to die there. But the published translation, for this idiomatic simplicity, has

thus are content to imagine that a portion of the remains of their deceased relative has gained purifying contact with the sacred water.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier still, we see his mind moving towards the hope of portraying the life of the people around him.

No one, I say, has yet adequately told the life-story of the patient, submissive, family-loving, home-clinging, eternally-exploited Bengali, as he dwells in his secluded corner of this tremendously busy world.

This is dated 1886.

We pass over seven years, and see how sympathy has deepened, during these years when it was finding imaginative utterance :

Over there, on the sky-piercing peaks of Simla, you will find it hard to realize exactly what an important event the coming of the clouds is here, or how many are anxiously looking up to the sky, hailing their advent.

I feel a great tenderness for these peasant folk—our ryots—big, helpless, infantile children of Providence, who must have food brought to their very lips, or they are undone. When the breasts of Mother Earth dry up, they are at a loss what to do, and can only cry. But no sooner is their hunger satisfied than they forget all their past sufferings.

I know not whether the socialistic ideal of a more equal distribution of wealth is attainable, but if not, then such dispensation of Providence is indeed cruel, and man a truly unfortunate creature. For if in this world misery must exist, so be it ; but let some little loophole, some glimpses of possibility at least, be left, which may serve to urge the nobler portion of humanity to hope and struggle unceasingly for its alleviation.<sup>2</sup>

We have travelled far from the poet of clouds and sunsets.

<sup>1</sup> *Glimpses of Bengal*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

I have quoted largely from these letters which a happy chance has given us in the poet's lifetime; yet I ask forgiveness for one more passage:

I regard these grown-up children with the same kind of affection that I have for little children—but there is also a difference. They are more infantile still. Little children will grow up later on, but these big children never.

A meek and radiantly simple soul shines through their worn and wrinkled, old bodies. Little children are merely simple, they have not the unquestioning, unwavering devotion of these. If there be any undercurrent along which the souls of men may have communication with one another then my sincere blessing will surely reach and serve them.<sup>1</sup>

His sympathy has been more effective than he dreamed, for it found not an undercurrent but one of the main streams of his expression. As Euripides was charged with making slaves interesting, so those who would stand on ancient ways might charge Rabindranath with making the petty griefs and joys of ryots significant. Much of his permanent fame will rest on these stories. They are the very life of his native land, the Bengal so tenderly invoked by him as Lakshmi, with such a succession of lovely, memory-stirring sights, filling the heart with peace.

<sup>1</sup> *Glimpses of Bengal*, pp. 104-5.



## THE JIBANDEBATĀ

*Sonār Tari*—*The Golden Boat*—lyrics written between 1891 and 1893, is the typical book of the *Sādbhanā* period. It is of importance, because it marks the clear emergence of the *jibandebatā*—the *life-deity*—motive, which for a time dominated Rabindranath's work. This phase continued throughout *Chitrā*, which was written between 1893 and the spring of 1895 and is recognized as the consummation of this first magnificent half of his life's work; 'the sunset of *Sonār Tari*', he calls it.<sup>1</sup>

'*Jibandebatā*', says Mr Mahalanobis, 'is personal—the presiding deity of the poet's life—not quite that even—it is the poet himself—the Inner Self of the poet, who is more than this earthly incarnation.' We must remember how the Indian mind has been haunted by the belief in many incarnations, which suggest a self whose sum-total is vaster than the present self. Rabindranath, a Brahmo, did not hold this belief as dogma; but gradually he grew to be dominated by the thought of a deeper fuller self, seeking expression through the temporary self. He insisted that *jibandebatā* is not to be identified with God. He is the Lord of the poet's life, is realizing himself through the poet's work; the poet gives expression to him, and in this sense is inspired. Rabindranath believed this to be true of all poets, in so far as they are true poets; and, presumably, of all men, whatever their work. He had always taken his genius with intense seriousness; and this *jibandebatā* doctrine brought a very solemn sense of responsibility, as though God had put a Demiurge in watchful control of his effort. The mood escapes from morbidity, on the whole, because of the humility which the thought often brings a humility which saves the poet from mad self-exaltation.

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

Only a poet intensely preoccupied with himself would have evolved the *jibandebatā* doctrine; and *Sonār Tari* and *Chitrā* could hardly be read right through by any foreigner, however great his admiration for Rabindranath, without exasperation sometimes. The two books are full of lovely poetry, and his countrymen rank them high. But their undeniable beauty, so soft and luxurious, does not compensate for want of strength and variety; and the writer's obsession with his own destiny is repellent to normal men. It seems clear, too, that he was over-writing himself. Judging by the dates attached to the poems of *Chitrā*, especially, it would almost seem to have been his motto, No day without (not a line, but) a poem.<sup>1</sup>

Today the interest of the *jibandebatā* poems is chiefly personal. The idea is a syncretism, on which the poet's highly individualized mind set its own stamp. In one aspect, it is like a half-way house for this Brahmo poet—the acceptance neither of the Hindu doctrine of many incarnations nor of the usual Christian and Brahmo belief in none before the present one, but a doctrine which suggests and admits of both. It should be noted that there is no teaching of any *karma* governing the *jibandebatā's* action. But it would be almost as unwise to press anything in the *jibandebatā* idea as Rabindranath's definite belief, otherwise than in a poetic sense, as it would be to treat similarly Wordsworth's pre-existence teaching in the *Intimations* ode. The idea is not susceptible of simple exposition; but it shows us an Eastern mind in contact with Western thought, and sinking its plummet into that subconscious which modern psychology has brought forward, and using the thought of today as a key to ancient speculation. The idea, the poet told me, 'has a double strand. There is the Vaishnava dualism—always keeping the separateness of the self—and there is the Upanishadic monism. God is wooing each individual; and God is also the ground-reality of all, as in the vedantist unification. When the *jibandebatā* idea came to me, I felt an

<sup>1</sup> It will be remembered that Virgil's motto is said to have been *nulla dies sine linea*, 'No day without a line' of verse.



overwhelming joy—it seemed a discovery, new with me—in this deepest self seeking expression. I wished to sink into it, to give myself up wholly to it. 'Today,' I am on the same plane as my readers, and I am trying to find what the *jibandebatā* was<sup>1</sup>.

To me, he seems to have stopped short with the decorative aspects of his first guessing—which robs the *jibandebatā* doctrine or theory, whatever we decide to call it, of much of its value. His followers made much of it, causing widespread irritation in his own country; ultimately, perhaps, the world will read these poems for their beauty of detail, and leave the *jibandebatā* theory alone.

Rabindranath's knowledge of science has made many an intuition, and many an Indian tradition and belief, glimmer for him with meaning. His mind, gazing at tree or water, becomes of the earth, earthy; and he lets it go, gliding into the heart of this world, where it knows itself at home, a denizen here ages before this frail body became its cage. As early as a remarkable poem in *Morning Songs—Reunion*—he 'recognized reunion with Nature as a definitely significant fact'.<sup>2</sup> His *Reminiscences* tell how close he felt to the physical world. 'Rabindranath realizes this quite often. Do you remember that letter in which he speaks of his kin-feeling with grass and trees and all things that live? In fact, his deep interest in Nature is tinged with intimately personal (even reminiscent) emotions.'<sup>3</sup>

Despite its preoccupation with the *jibandebatā*, *The Golden Boat's* pervading message is one of this world wherein men, according to Wordsworth, 'find their happiness or not at all'. Tagore repudiates with scorn the favourite teaching of the thinkers of his land, that the shows of earth are a dream. *The Golden Boat* 'was my first popular book, the first that gathered a group of readers who became my admirers. Perhaps *Mānasi* was really the first to do this. But *Sonār Tari* gave me my place'.<sup>4</sup>

I propose to show the quality of *Chitrā* by quotation only; and quotation of its best pieces. *The Farewell to*

<sup>1</sup> In 1922.

<sup>2</sup> Mahalanobis.

<sup>3</sup> Mahalanobis.

<sup>4</sup> Conversation.

Heaven is ranked by Ajitkumar Chakravarti as a *jibandebatā* piece. It shows a soul whose merit is exhausted about to return to Earth, to reincarnation. Bidding farewell, he passes among the assembled deities, busied in their eternal round of joyless joyfulness. The poem luxuriates in woe. As an idealization of Earth and her homely festivals of human love, it is wonderful; as a kind of moonlit dream of Heaven it is not less wonderful. Perhaps its highest reach is the series of clear-cut vignettes, of different scenes coming into view—'Thy blue sky, thy light, thy crowded habitations'.

O King of Gods, the garland of *mandar*<sup>1</sup>-blossoms pales about my neck, the radiant sign goes out on my fading brow. My merit wears thin. Today, O Gods and Goddesses, is the day of my farewell to Heaven. I have lived in bliss, like a God in Heaven, ten million years. Today, in this last moment of farewell I had hoped to find trace of tears in heavenly eyes. But griefless and heartless is this land of heavenly joy, looking listlessly at me. *Lākhs*<sup>2</sup> of years are not a wink of their eyelids. When in our hundreds, like stars shredded from their home, their splendour gone, we drop in a moment from the region of Gods into the world's current of endless birth and death, Heaven feels not so much pain as the pipal-twigg when the wrinkled leaf falls from it. If pain could move you, the shadow of this separation would have showed; Heaven's eternal splendour would become pale, like Earth, with soft, dewy vapours. The paradisaal groves would mourn and murmur, and Mandakini<sup>3</sup> would flow singing to her banks a piteous story; Evening would go her way dejectedly, crossing the lonely heath at day's finish; still Night in the chant of her crickets would have lifted a hymn of renunciation amid her court of stars. In the celestial city the dancing Menaka's<sup>4</sup> golden anklets would have sometimes broken chime. The golden *vinā*<sup>5</sup> resting on Urvasi's<sup>6</sup> breast would sometimes have suddenly rung beneath the grip of her fingers, with pitiless-pitiful modulation. Causeless tears would have shown in the tearless eyes of Gods. Suddenly Sachi, seated at her lord's side, would have looked into Indra's eyes, as if seeking there water for her thirst. The deep sighing of the world would have sometimes mounted from the

<sup>1</sup> One of the five trees of Indra's Paradise.

<sup>2</sup> A *lākh* is 100,000.

<sup>3</sup> The Ganges before its descent to Earth. <sup>4</sup> A nymph of Indra's Heaven.

<sup>5</sup> Lute.

<sup>6</sup> A famous courtesan of Indra's Heaven.



Earth on the stream of the winds, and in the groves of Paradise the flowers would have shivered to the ground.

Remain, O Heaven, with thy laughing face! Gods, quaff your nectar! Heaven is an abode of bliss for you alone; we are exiles. Earth, our motherland, is not Heaven. From her eyes tears flow, if after a brief sojourn any leaves her, though but for moments. The frail and small, the unfortunate and those who wither in the heats of sin—all she would clasp to her soft breast, enwrapping with her eager embrace. Her mother's heart is soothed with the touch of dusty bodies. Let nectar flow in your Heaven; but in Earth the river of love, ever-mingled joy and sorrow, keeping green with tears the tiny heavens of Earth!

O *Apsaras*,<sup>1</sup> may the lustre of thine eyes never pale with love's anguish! I bid thee farewell. Thou pinest for none, thou hast grief for none. But my beloved, if she is born on Earth in the poorest house, in a hidden cottage beneath the shade of pipals, on the outskirts of some village on a river bank, that girl will lay up in her breast for me a store of sweetness. In childhood, making at dawn an image of Siva on the river bank,<sup>2</sup> she will pray for me as a boon. At evening she will float her lighted lamp on the stream,<sup>3</sup> and, standing alone on the *ghât*, with timid, trembling breast, will eagerly watch for her fortune. One day, at an auspicious hour, she will come to my house with downcast eyes, her forehead brightened with sandal paste, her body robed in red silk, will come to the music of flutes of festival. Through days happy and unhappy, her auspicious bracelets on her arms, the auspicious vermilion streak on her brow, she will be my Household Queen, the full moon above my world's sea. Sometimes, O Gods, I shall remember this Heaven as a distant dream, when suddenly at midnight waking I shall see the moonlight fallen on the snowy bed—see my beloved sleeping, her arms outspread, her zone unbound. Suddenly awaking to my light caressing kiss, she will turn to my breast. The south wind will waft flower-fragrances our way, and the wakeful *koki*!<sup>4</sup> will sing on the distant branch.

O Lowly One, my pale Mother distressed with sorrow, tearful-eyed, O Earth! My heart today, after many days, has burst into

<sup>1</sup> Dancing-girl of Indra's Heaven.

<sup>2</sup> The Goddess Uma, having vowed to marry none but Siva, made three sand *lingas* on a river bank, and worshipped them till he appeared. This legend is commemorated by a festival.

<sup>3</sup> A festival in honour of Lakshmi. Saucers containing lamps are floated. If they founder, the girls who launched them anticipate early widowhood.

<sup>4</sup> The hawk-cuckoo, very noisy at dawn and at intervals during the night.

weeping for thee! My eyes, dry through all the grief of parting, become tearful, and this Heaven vanishes like an idle fancy, a shadow-picture. Thy blue sky, thy light, thy crowded habitations, the stretching beaches by thy sea, the white line of snow on the crest of thy blue hills, the silent sunrise among thy trees, evening with bent eyes beside the empty river—with one teardrop all these have come, like reflections in a mirror.

Mother who hast lost thy son, that stream of sorrowful tears which on the last day of farewell fell from thine eyes and moistened thy mother's breasts, has dried by now. Yet I know well that, whenever I return to thy house, two arms will clasp me, the conch of welcome will sound, thou wilt receive me, like one ever known, into thy house, into a world of love filled with joy and grief and fear, and overshadowed with affection, among thy sons and daughters. Ever after thou wilt sit with trembling heart, wakeful beside my head, fearful and lifting thy soft gaze upward to the Gods, ever anxious lest thou shouldst lose him whom thou hast obtained!

*The Farewell to Heaven* is a *jibandebatā* poem only in the sense that its thought-stratum is that out of which the true *jibandebatā* poems often rise. Its passionate love of Earth has already found at least one consummate expression, in the deep-withdrawn brooding fires of *Ahalyā*. In *Chitrā*, that great poem is now recalled by a passage in *Evening*, the most elaborate and perfect of his many poems with this title or theme:

there drifts up before the pale Earth's fluttering eyes the vanished process of ages on ages . . . She seems to remember the mists of her childhood, then the flames of her blazing youth; then her mother-toils, giving life in the green comfortable house of Annapurna, taking to her breast millions of lives—sorrow and teen, battle and death unending!

This pregnant moment of vision is a marvellous piece of compression and of imaginative use of modern science, in packed glowing words recalling the whirling nebulae, the clear intolerable blaze, the rank steaming mists, before life began to be. But the poem, as a whole, is observant rather than imaginative, and it falls below *A Night of Full Moon*, whose concluding lines have an extraordinary



passion and adoration—a dazzling picture of the Goddess within ; and without, the clamorous poet. His enthusiasm so possesses him that he overlooks the fact that his original invocation to Night has passed into worship of the world's Ideal Beauty.

See, the Earth is slumbering, and in every house the windows are shut ; I alone am wakeful. Show thyself alone amid this universal sleep, O Beauty Infinite, enrapturing the three worlds ! I am pained with endless thirst ; I am sleepless ever, anxious ever. Day and night, to the temple of my heart I bring my offerings for the unknown God. Sitting on Desire's bank, I shatter my heart and build images, an endless effort ! O Mysterious One, have pity ! Put off thy infinity of mystery ! Come thou ! Rend apart today that never-quivering shroud of boundless sky, and from midst of that unfathomed stillness of waveless sea rise slowly like the youthful Lakshmi, rise to my heart's shore as I gaze ! Let the hours like shredded petals fall all about thee, and let the mantle of darkness drop away from thee ! From thy bosom draw the robe, uncover thy white brows, push apart the hanging ringlets shading thine eyes ! In this tranquil night, in this calm loneliness, show me that Heavenly Form no man has seen ! Touch swiftly with thy feet my eager, opened heart, imprint on my brow a kiss, like the solitary star of evening ! Send the thrill of that embrace rippling through my limbs, sounding the song of Eternity on the strings of my veins ! Let the heart break with excess of bliss ; like the tune of a song let it go through space ! O Immortal One, for one night make me immortal !

I am sitting before the door of your nuptial grove. Soft voices come to my ear, the jingling of gold anklets rings sweetly. From whose tresses fall these blossoms on my breast, troubling the stream of consciousness ? Where are you singing ? Who are you who drink together in a vessel of golden rays the wine of immortality ? You who encircle your brows with garlands of full-blown *parijāt*, whose fragrance floats on the gentle wind, maddening the heart with a strange pang of severance ? Open your door, open your door ! Only for this once accept me into your assembly of beauty ! In the lonely temple amid the *nandan-grove*<sup>1</sup> is a couch of flowers—there is Lakshmi the world's beloved, the shining Girl, sitting alone in the light of gems, with sleepless eyes ! I the poet am bringing a garland for her !

<sup>1</sup> The park of Indra's Paradise.

No translation could bring out the richness of the mood, or give any hint of the music. But *Urvasi*<sup>1</sup> is bolder yet—the star-twisted garland that he flings at the feet of Ideal Beauty, when he has broken into her presence :

Thou art not Mother, art not Daughter, art not Bride, thou  
beautiful comely One,

O Dweller in Paradise, *Urvasi* !<sup>2</sup>

When Evening descends on the pastures, drawing about her  
tired body her golden cloth,

Thou lightest the lamp within no home.

With hesitant wavering steps, with throbbing breast and  
downcast look,

Thou dost not go smiling to any Beloved's bed,

In the hushed midnight.

Thou art unveiled like the rising Dawn,

Unshrinking One !

Like some stemless flower, blooming in thyself,

When didst thou blossom, *Urvasi* ?

That primal Spring, thou didst arise from the churning of Ocean,

Nectar in thy right hand, venom in thy left.<sup>3</sup>

The swelling mighty Sea, like a serpent tamed with spells,

Drooping his thousand towering hoods,

Fell at thy feet !

White as the *kunda*-blossom, a naked beauty, adored by the

King of the Gods,

Thou flawless One !

Wast thou never bud, never maiden of tender years,

O eternally youthful *Urvasi* ?

Sitting alone, under whose dark roof

Didst thou know childhood's play, toying with gems and pearls?

At whose side, in what chamber lit with the flashing of gems,

Lulled by the sea-waves' chant, didst thou sleep on coral bed,

A smile on thy pure face ?

That moment when thou awakedst into the Universe, thou wast

framed of youth,

In full-blown beauty !

<sup>1</sup> *The Fugitive*, I, 11.

<sup>2</sup> When the ocean was churned, to recover the lost nectar of immortality, *Urvasi*, a nymph of entrancing beauty, rose from it. She became the chief dancing-girl in Indra's Heaven.

<sup>3</sup> The nectar and poison both emerged from the churning ; but it is Rabindranath who puts them in *Urvasi*'s hands.



From age to age thou hast been the world's beloved,  
 O unsurpassed in loveliness, Urvasi !  
 Breaking their meditation, sages lay at thy feet the fruits of  
 their penance ;<sup>1</sup>  
 Smitten with thy glance, the three worlds grow restless with  
 youth ;  
 The blinded winds blow thine intoxicating fragrance around ;  
 Like the black bee, honey-drunken, the infatuated poet wanders,  
 with greedy heart,  
 Lifting chants of wild jubilation !  
 While thou . . . thou goest, with jingling anklets and  
 waving skirts,  
 Restless as lightning !

In the assembly of the Gods, when thou dancest in ecstasy of  
 joy,  
 O swaying wave, Urvasi !  
 The companies of billows in mid-ocean swell and dance, beat  
 on beat ;  
 In the crests of the corn the skirts of Earth tremble ;  
 From thy necklace stars fall off in the sky ;  
 Suddenly in the breast of man the heart forgets itself,  
 The blood dances !  
 Suddenly in the horizon thy zone bursts—  
 Ah, wild in abandon !

On the Sunrise Mount in Heaven thou art the embodied Dawn,  
 O world-enchancing Urvasi !  
 Thy slender form is washed with the streaming tears of the  
 Universe ;  
 The ruddy hue of thy feet is painted with the heart's blood  
 of the three worlds ;  
 Thy tresses escaped from the braid, thou hast placed thy light  
 feet,  
 Thy lotus-feet, on the Lotus of the blossomed  
 Desires of the Universe !  
 Endless are thy masks in the mind's heaven,  
 O Comrade of dreams !

<sup>1</sup> Indian legend tells of sages tempted by envious Gods to break their penance, before it had made them too powerful. A nymph was generally the actual temptress, the 'historic Urvasi', if one may so call her, to distinguish her from Rabindranath's symbol, being often chosen for the part.

Hear what crying and weeping everywhere rise for thee,  
O cruel, deaf Urvasi !

Say, will that Ancient Prime ever revisit this earth ?—  
From the shoreless unfathomed deep wilt thou rise again,  
with wet locks ?—

First in the First Dawn that Form will show !  
In the startled gaze of the Universe all thy limbs will be  
weeping,

The waters flowing from them !  
Suddenly the vast Sea, in songs never heard before,  
Will thunder with its waves !

She will not return, she will not return !—that Moon of Glory  
has set !

She has made her home on the Mount of Setting, has  
Urvasi !

Therefore on Earth today with the joyous breath of Spring  
Mingles the long-drawn sigh of some eternal separation.  
On the night of full moon, when the world brims with laughter,  
Memory, from somewhere far away, pipes a flute that brings  
unrest,

The tears gush out !  
Yet in that weeping of the spirit Hope wakes and lives,  
Ah, Unfettered One !

In this poem we have the wealth and concentration of his earlier characteristics. Its weakness is the fact that so much of its material has been present in many scores of his poems already. But part of its refreshing effect comes from contrast, from the reader's gladness to find at last a poet who is aware that 'downcast eyes' and 'jingling anklets' are not the only things that can make a woman lovely.

Urvasi is not merely the heavenly dancer of Indian myth. She *is* that ; 'Dweller in Paradise', 'adored by the King of the Gods'. But she is the cosmic spirit of life, in the mazes of an eternal dance. She 'is Beauty dissociated from all human relationships'; and also that world-enchancing Love which (though not in Dante's sense) 'moves the sun and other stars'. She is Lucretius's *hominum divumque voluptas, Alma Venus* ;<sup>1</sup> is Swinburne's

<sup>1</sup> 'Delight of men and gods, Venus the beloved.'



'perilous goddess', born of the sea-foam; is a mere-wife such as would be native to many a North European story. This is a meeting of East and West indeed, a tangle of Indian mythology, modern science, legends of European romance. Rabindranath here is sheer poet, with no prose admixture. If one stanza is more superb, where all are superb, it is the fifth; if one line more than another, it is the intranslatable one about the skirts of Earth trembling in the crests of the nodding golden corn, as the ecstasy races through our Mother's veins. A poet can make even the aged mother of us all young and quivering with eagerness, by the incantation of his verse! Not a word falters, not a line flags. There is splendid onomatopœia, in the lines which describe the towering drooping Sea; the booming dentals and heavy labials are used as skilfully as in Shakespeare's

Methought the billows spoke and told me of it;  
The winds did sing it to me, and the thunder,  
That deep and dreadful organ-pipe, pronounced  
The name of Prosper; it did bass my trespass.

Rabindranath's great fortune was in knowing the sea, and in spending so many of his years beside the great floods. Yet he never forgets that the ocean-born *Urvasi* is in Paradise. An undertone of sadness pervades the poem, and the last stanza, in an exquisitely modulated minor key, like the wailing of the flute he loves so well, sums up all the sorrow of separation, the mournfulness of reverie, the pensive beauty of moonlight, even the beauty of an Indian moonlight.

*Urvasi* crowns his first great period, this *Sādhana* one which in the opinion of many represents his genius at its highest and greatest. If we cannot subscribe to this opinion, remembering the more open-air thought and emotion of *Kshanikā* and *Kalpanā* and the giant's strength and superbly easy poise of *Balākā*—a far greater book than *Chitrā*—nevertheless, in *Urvasi* and *Chitrāngadā*,<sup>1</sup> certain qualities showed which henceforth were to be subdued to

<sup>1</sup> See next chapter.

other ones in his work. Never again does he attain this sweep and magnificence of naturalistic poetry, unfettered by any darker questionings of life and fate and unsobered by religious reflection. I have set out the poems of this first half of his life with such fulness as I could, because they have hardly appeared in his English versions of his work and show a very different poet from the one the outside world has taken him to be.



## LAST DRAMATIC WORK OF THE SĀDHANĀ PERIOD

*Chitrāṅgadā*, englished as *Chitra*, was written in 1891 and published in 1892. It is his loveliest drama; a lyrical feast, though its form is blank verse. Milton's poetical vein flowed smoothly from the autumnal to the vernal equinox. Rabindranath reveals the interesting fact that it was between the Rains and the Spring flowertide that he generally wrote drama. 'All my plays except *Chitra* were written in the winter. In that season lyrical fervour is apt to grow cold, and one gets the leisure to write drama.' I fancy this is the reverse of the usual experience of poets. The play has gained by its lucky birth in the full exuberance of his song-season. It is almost perfect in unity and conception, magical in expression; a nearly flawless whole, knit together by the glowing heat of inspiration. For lightness, it is a mask, rather than a play, yet with a central core of drama, which is extraordinarily concentrated and passionately felt and lived, in the character of Chitrangada, the huntress who discovers herself to be woman after all, and woman as elemental as Miranda though far more awakened by a situation tense and quivering with chance of misery or ecstatic bliss and fulfilment. It has only four *dramatis personæ*, for the villagers are lay-figures; and of these four two are Immortals, the Love-God and his friend Vasanta, the Genius of Spring. These divine actors are as adequately present as Shakespeare's elves in his enchanted woodland; they mingle in human affairs with friendly half-amused grace.

The play opens with unerring simplicity, in the frank colloquy between the king's daughter, the tomboy who

<sup>1</sup> Letter dated May 1892.

would be a woman, and the two deities. Note their easy supple kindness, lordly yet free from all touch of stiffness in their condescension. After all, it is with Chitrangada that they are talking. 'I am he', says the Love-God, 'who was the first-born in the heart of the Creator. I bind in bonds of pain and bliss the lives of men and women.' 'And I', says his fellow, 'am his friend—Vasanta—the King of the Seasons. Death and decrepitude would wear the world to the bone, but that I follow them and constantly attack them. I am Eternal Youth.' And Chitrangada, her heart aglow with fierce new hunger, turns to this so potent friend. 'I bow to thee, Lord Vasanta.' The interview ends with her prayer: 'For a single day make me superbly beautiful, even as beautiful as was the sudden blooming of love in my heart. Give me but one day of perfect beauty, and I will answer for the days that follow'. The Love-God grants her prayer, to which his comrade adds abundant largesse, brimming her cup with generous fulness. 'Not for the short span of a day, but for the whole year the charm of spring blossoms shall nestle round thy limbs.'

The great scenes which follow are compressed in the English, with varying result. There is loss, in the omission of the long dreamy opening of Scene II, with its description of the pool, so lonely that the wood-goddesses, the 'forest Lakshmis', bathe here in the silent noon, or on full moon nights lie at rest on the sleeping water; and of the passage where Arjuna tells how many an ardour, many a dear-bought hardness of body or strength of will, longed to lie down at the feet of the just-seen Chitrangada, as her lion couches at the Goddess Durga's feet. Or, for a lesser loss, lovely even in deprivation, take a sentence mutilated in obedience to the laws which forbid in one language what they permit in another. It is such a conceit as the Vaishnava poets love, but rarely handle so well:

Her robes in ecstasy sought to mingle with the lustre of her limbs.

\* The quotations from *Chitrāṅgadā* are taken from the poet's own version (*Chitra*), except when otherwise stated.



This is more English, in 'the vague veilings of her body should melt in ecstasy'.

Yet, though much leisurely beauty goes, the scenes gain, as the whole piece does, to this extent, that the English has a swiftness of action which the Bengali text lacks. Nor is this all the gain. The play was attacked as immoral, and to this day offends many readers, not all of whom are either fools or milksops. The English reader will probably be surprised to hear this; and the poet himself rejected the criticism. 'I defy anyone to find anything immoral in it. It is sensuous, of course; but then poetry must be that', he added, remembering Milton's description of poetry as simple, impassioned, and sensuous. His claim may be conceded; yet not without hesitation. Scene III is as ardent and throbbing as anything in erotic literature anywhere, of an extreme full beauty. But it has dangers which the poet has by no means completely escaped. Probably many whose opinion is not limited by any rigid puritanism are glad for artistic reason that Keats was persuaded to forgo his intention of making it clear, in his *Eve of St. Agnes*, that 'the melting of Porphyro into Madeline's dream, at the enchanted climax of the poem, implied love's full fruition between them then and there'.<sup>1</sup> In Tagore's play the fruition takes place.<sup>2</sup> Many of his Indian readers were, and are, repelled by this, and the purpose of the play has been represented as being the glorification of sexual abandonment. This is unfair, since the play's action lies in the heroic period, before our modern morality was born. Nevertheless, despite all Rabindranath's purity of purpose, the play, in these earlier passages, repeatedly trembles on the edge of the bog of lubricity. What he said about his attempt in *Sharps and Flats* to pull himself free of all sensuality is recalled by the closing scenes

<sup>1</sup> Sir Sidney Colvin, *Life of John Keats*, p. 367. 'At this point Woodhouse's prudery took alarm. He pleaded against the change vehemently, and Keats to tease him still more vehemently defended it, vowing that his own and his hero's character for virility required the new reading and that he did not write for misses.'

<sup>2</sup> This is the so-called Gandharva marriage of ancient India, the marriage that took place between Dusyanta and Sakuntala.

of *Chitrāṅgadā*, where there is the same struggle to get back to the firm sod of self-restraint. It is not Arjuna alone who has wearied of Eros. The poet himself has felt revulsion; and after *Chitrāṅgadā* he never returned to such a frank handling of passion. Twenty years later, going over the scene for his Western readers, he limned his picture on austerer lines, perhaps an implied condemnation of the earlier ones.

It is worth while plunging the hand, almost at random, into this basket of beauty. Here is an image:

So, if the white lotus, on opening her eyes in the morning, were to arch her neck and see her shadow in the water, would she wonder at herself the live-long day.

The woman awakens, at vision of her lover's need of her and his outsurging passion towards her:

to face that fervent gaze that almost grasps you like clutching hands of the hungry spirit within; to feel his heart struggling to break its bounds, urging its passionate cry through the entire body—and then to send him away like a beggar—no, impossible! Ah, God of Love, what fearful flame is this with which thou hast enveloped me? I burn; and I burn whatever I touch.

Follows that calm reassurance:

I desire to know what happened last night—

a prosy simplicity which is the most poetic touch imaginable, giving us in a flash the perfect poise and rest of these Immortals, holding in their own firm hands the threads of action and securely governing the issues of that strife which is tormenting the girl. Her reply throbs and glows, in words whose beauty must make them immortal; and the deities add their lyrical antiphony:

*Varanta.* A limitless life of glory can bloom and spend itself in a morning.

*Madana.* Like an endless meaning in the narrow span of a song.

She feels the shadow of return to her old unlovely form, of the muscular angular huntress, already falling on her:

Alas: thou daughter of mortals! I stole from the divine store-house the fragrant wine of heaven, filled with it one earthly night to



the brim, and placed it in thy hand to drink, yet still I hear this cry of anguish !

Yes, she replies ; for her body, which has won Arjuna's love, is now her hated rival, daily decked and sent to her beloved's arms :

This borrowed beauty, this falsehood that enwraps me, will slip from me, as the petals fall from an overblown flower ; and the woman ashamed of her naked poverty will sit weeping day and night.

The inexorable hour draws nigh, and she is reminded that tomorrow her loveliness will return to that spring-world of leaf and blossom whence it came—

The thrift of our great Mother, calling back  
Her forces, that the Spring may have no lack  
Of customary show.<sup>1</sup>

'In its last hour', she cries, 'let my beauty flash its brightest, like the final flicker of a dying flame.' She obtains her wish, to find it useless, for Arjuna is dreaming of the Chitrangada of whom he hears folk talk, the maiden who kept their hamlets free from harm. As so often, this poet has given himself to the woman, and Arjuna is a vaguer figure ; but it is true and profound psychology which shows the man of action satiate with beauty and requiring, if his love is to last, an element of idealization and imagination in it. Chitrangada tells him that his heroine has no charms :

Her womanly love must content itself dressed in rags ; beauty is denied her. She is like the spirit of a cheerless morning, sitting upon the stony mountain-peak, all her light blotted out by dark clouds—

an image whose sublimity is the more impressive, rising, as it does, out of this field of softer loveliness. Only too rarely does the work of this poet, whose verse so sings and flashes, shine in this naked fashion, as bleak and stern as Francis Thompson's

wind, that sings to himself, as he makes stride  
Lonely and terrible on the Andean height.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> T. E. Brown, *An Autumn Trinket*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ode to the Setting Sun*.

The play ends with Chitrangada's proud burning revelation of herself—still too frank to hide the love which consumes her, but now a woman who has proved her power to keep her beloved :

Today I can offer you only Chitra, the daughter of a king.

Arjuna, who has listened in silence through all that long self-revelation, answers with three<sup>1</sup> words. His life is full, for his experience is shown to be one with his dreams.

It is impossible to understand Mr Rhys' judgement that '*Chitra* is like a piece of sculpture'.<sup>2</sup> Equally inexplicable is his remark that in it 'the supernal powers come into play across the desires of men and women who think to win love, and find it bound by immutable law'. So little do 'the supernal powers' cross Chitrangada and Arjuna, that it is expressly by their kindly guidance that the woman keeps heart as her beauty ebbs from her, and finds her way home to her hero's deepest love.

Rabindranath's translation of *Chitrāṅgadā* provides an interesting study of his method, and is the best example of his insight into another language, an insight which is one of the most astonishing sides of his many-sided genius. The luxuriance of the Bengali has been shorn away, largely (I think) because of the lapse of twenty years between the play and its translation. Passages already quoted will serve as illustrations. Madana's beautiful

Tell me, slender lady, the tale of yesterday. I have a desire to know what my loosèd flowery dart wrought,

is touched by the skill begotten of twenty years of artistic service, and becomes the simplicity of

I desire to know what happened last night.

Compare also, the Bengali

As in a song, in the tune of a moment, an endless utterance cries out weeping

and the poet's rendering :

Like an endless meaning in the narrow span of a song.

<sup>1</sup> Three in the Bengali.

<sup>2</sup> In his *Rabindranath Tagore*.



Then :

Not for the short span of a day, but for one whole year the charm of spring blossoms shall nestle round thy limbs,

a faithful translation, yet gains by that word 'nestle'. Nor has there been any loss in the transformation by which like the dawn, with the brightness of its sun everlastingly hidden . . . she sits eternally alone on the peak of her prowess

becomes the fine simile of the spirit of a cheerless morning, lonely on a rock-summit. Rabindranath's exceptionally receptive genius has not come into contact with our Northern thought and life without enrichment.

Occasionally, however, the English text carries a filigree prettiness which makes the poem false to itself :

The moon had moved to the west, peering through the leaves to spy this wonder of divine art wrought in a fragile human frame.

Occasionally, too, a passage or a sentence in the English text is more diffuse, owing to the poet's awareness that his readers know extremely little about Indian matters. It is a mistake to introduce 'explanations' into the text. He mars the splendid opening, Chitrangada's question :

Art thou the Five-Arrowed One ?

by the gloss 'The Lord of Love'. Madana's answer :

I am he that is born in the mind, drawing the hearts of all men and women into the bonds of pain,

receives similar expansion into

I am he who was the first-born in the heart of the Creator—

a weakening, surely.

There is exquisite charm in the girl's humility, humility with just a hint of mockery in it, as she fronts these gay deities, so powerful yet so hard to take altogether seriously :  
*Chitrangada.*

That pain, those bonds, thy handmaid knows. I bow at thy feet.  
(Turning to his companion), Lord, thou art . . . what God ?

*Vasanta.*

I am the Seasons' King. Decay and Death are two demons who momentarily seek to bring out the skeleton of the world. I

follow, follow, step by step, and attack them. Day and night goes on that battle! I am the world's Eternal Youth.

*Chitrangada.*

I bow to thee, O Diety! Gratified is thy handmaid at sight of thy Divinity!

Something of this supple urbanity is lost in the poet's own translation.

Then, the anguish of such a passage as that in which Chitrangada compares her agony, returning from her rejection by Arjuna, to the terrible pain of impalation is weakened (perhaps necessarily) by the 'red-hot needles' of the English. And, at the end of Scene III, the poet omits the Love-God's hint that the year's festival will close with Chitrangada the mother of Arjuna's son, and therefore dear to her lover for a reason other than herself.

*Chitrāṅgadā* was his farewell to blank verse. In *The Curse at Farewell* he took up zestfully his more natural medium, rhyme. His genius is essentially decorative in its working, emotional in its motive. Perhaps this places him as a dramatist—one of the noblest that have ever used the interplay of human characters to express thought and feeling, but not of the few who create new beings, 'more real than living man'. His bent is lyrical, and he belongs very definitely to the class of poets who are assisted rather than impeded by the necessity to rhyme. His complaint was that blank verse is not 'graceful' enough; so he invented what Mr Mahalanobis calls 'a sort of rhyming blank verse', in which the rhymes are casually thrown in, as if extras, with a resultant effect like that of Browning's *Sordello*. Possibly, in giving way to his natural pull towards the decorative, using rhymed verse on the ground of added gracefulness, as if that were a dramatist's first aim, he aggravated the tendency to mere prettiness so lamentably present in his later work.

Whatever the ultimate result of Rabindranath's rejection of blank verse may have been, the inception, in *The Curse at Farewell* and *Mālinī*, is successful. *The Curse* is the first of a series of tiny dramas, or, rather, dramatic



interviews. In *Chitrāṅgadā*, we were admitted to the conversation of Immortals. We are again on the borders of that exalted society ; in these interviews the actors are generally semi-divine or, at least, heroic. Not even Kalidasa was on such familiar terms with Olympus.

Kach, the son of Brihaspati, preceptor of the Gods, has finished a considerable period of study—a thousand years, in fact. In the wars between the Gods and the Daityas,<sup>1</sup> the Daitya dead had always been restored to life by Sukra, their preceptor. Kach had been sent by the Gods to acquire this art, and by the intercession of Debjani, Sukra's daughter, had been accepted for a course of training, which course had included other matters than the official curriculum. The poem is a clash between a woman's passion and a man's selfish coldness. 'Bless me and give permission to depart', says Kach. 'Today my task is ended, and I return to Heaven.' 'Have you no unfulfilled desire, at going?' she replies. 'None', says this satisfied young God. 'None?' asks Debjani. 'If you go with one unfulfilled desire, however trivial, it will prick you hereafter like a spear of *kusa*-grass.' 'None whatever', says Kach.

*Debjani.*

O in the three worlds fortunate indeed !  
 Your task achieved, to Indra's kingdom speed,  
 Bearing aloft a nodding crest of praise.  
 The shouts of joy will swell in Heaven's ways,  
 The conch with ravishing tumult welcome sing !  
 The beauteous goddesses in showers will fling  
 Buds from the unfading groves of Paradise !  
 The nymphs will fill the heavenly street with cries  
 Of *Hail, All Hail !*

She reminds him of the years of his exile, spent in toil. Yet were there no compensations ? He is now taking a smiling farewell—(Yes, he interrupts ; for it is inauspicious to do otherwise). Is there nothing he will remember with regret and affection ? The forest shadows, the murmuring leaves and singing birds—can he leave all this so easily ?

<sup>1</sup> Titans.

The woods in sorrow cast a darker shade ;  
The wind wails ; and the dry leaves whirr to earth ;  
You only leave us with a face of mirth,  
Vanishing like a happy dream of night !

He answers politely that he will always consider this forest his native land. She points to the mighty banyan beneath whose shadow he had pastured his cows daily. Let him sit beneath it for a few moments, and take farewell of an old friend—they can spare him in Heaven for that long ! Kach takes elaborate farewell accordingly, in a speech which is directly modelled on Sakuntala's farewell to her plants. Rabindranath never lets pass any excuse for paying homage to Kalidasa. Debjani next reminds Kach of their sacred cow whose milk he has drunk so often ; and, in another long and beautiful speech, Kach expresses his regard for that excellent animal. This is the leisure of the Immortals, and it is fortunate that it is at the disposal of a poet, who can cram it with grace. The girl now reminds Kach of the river ; to this, too, he bows appropriately. The lissom verse begins to tremble with deeper feeling ; Debjani, her too transparent subterfuges shed, is coming to the naked display of her love. Does he not remember the day when he arrived, a wonderful shape in youth and clean-limbed beauty ? Yes, he remembers ; and remembers, also, how he saw her, her hair, newly-wet from her bath, falling over her white dress, a basket in her hand for flowers of worship. He had humbly begged to gather these for her ; they had made friends, and she had taken him to her father, as she recalls :

Laughing, I said : ' Father, a boon I seek '  
His hand upon my head, he then replied  
In loving tones, seating me at his side,  
' Nothing there is to you I can deny '  
' The Son of Brihaspati ', answered I,  
' Stands at your door, and begs admittance here,  
To learn from you.' Ah me ! how many a year  
Has fled since then, though in my memory yet  
It seems the morning of a day scarce set !



Kach assures her he is grateful. Grateful! exclaims Debjani in amazement. Even now she cannot believe that she has misread his heart. She tells him she loves him, and is sure he loves her; let him abandon all this nonsense of returning to the Gods, and let them drink happiness together. 'Indra is no longer your Indra!' she says, in the magnificent climax of her confident passion. He urges his solemn promise to the assembled Gods, when he left them. She asks indignantly why he has spent a millennium in intimate friendship with her. He protests that he sought simply knowledge. 'Liar!' she cries:

Did you come  
Only for learning to your teacher's roof?  
Sat you with steadfast eyes, alone, aloof,  
Fixed on your books? Did naught else claim your care?  
Why, then, forsaking study, did you fare  
From grove to grove, and flowers in garlands thread,  
And why with laughter place them on the head  
Of this unlearned maid? Was this your vow?  
Was this a student's work?

Why has he used nets of celestial guile to steal her heart? He has used her as a tool, to get close to her father's skill. He protests feebly, driven to the wall by this discovery of his meanness, that he really loves her, but his vow compels him to leave her. He will always remember her; and he begs forgiveness. 'Forgiveness!' she exclaims. 'Where is forgiveness in my mind? Brahmin, you have made this woman's heart hard as the thunder-stone!' She lays a curse upon his knowledge; he shall teach others, but himself be unable to put his science into practice.

This first essay in a form which later he made characteristically his own is very much more than a charming trifle, for its lush savannahs of descriptive beauty hide the tiger passion, their long passages quivering with human anger and sorrow. But its poetry is its most abiding memory, and not its wrath and suffering.

*Mālini*, the last dramatic work of the *Sādhana* period, is one of his most attractive plays, the richest of all in those shining natural glimpses in which he excels—glitter of

sunlight, smiling of lake or cloud or flower, quiet gleam of evening or softened radiance of full moon. The images are gentle and very wistful, and one hears notes that are to become familiar in his later verse :

The night is dark, and the boat is moored in the haven. Where is the captain, who shall take the wanderers home ? I feel I know the path, and the boat will thrill with life at my touch.<sup>1</sup>

The imagery is sometimes strained, and struggles with thoughts too big or as yet too vague for expression. This may be partly intentional, to show how confused are the thoughts in Malini's mind.

*Mālini* is much more dramatic in spirit than either *Chitrāṅgadā* or *The Curse at Farewell*. Yet, as emphatically as any of his plays, it is the vehicle of an idea. In it what I venture to call his Buddhism finds utterance. He was drawn by the Indian ascetic-prince, as by no other figure in the world's history. It was not Buddha's gentleness alone that attracted him ; he was drawn by his

great strength—his supreme calm. Rabindranath is temperamentally intellectual and meditative (in this he takes after his father to some extent) and this is why he is so much drawn by Gautama, rather than by Chaitanya. Chaitanya is emotional—Rabindranath prefers the reticence of Buddha. In the *Sāntiniketan* series he has several illuminating studies of Gautama and his teachings.<sup>2</sup>

To read *Mālini* is to understand the opposition his work has aroused. There can be no question as to the meaning of a poet who so plainly identifies himself with a thesis, and who refuses to stand apart from his theme. A force is at work, free and freeing, a mind extraordinarily emancipated :

Do they talk of banishment, King ? If this be a part of their creed, then let come the new religion, and let those Brahmans be taught afresh what is truth.

Brahmans rarely play in his work a part distinguished by common sense or sweet reasonableness. Yet the ringleader

<sup>1</sup> The translations are from *Sacrifice and Other Plays*.

<sup>2</sup> Mahalanobis.



of superstition and persecution is given the loveliest simile of the drama—so fair is Rabindranath, putting strongly what he does not agree with, and declining to take sides in argument till all that can be said for the side he detests has been said :

Is yonder moon, lying asleep among soft fleecy clouds, the true emblem of everlasting reality ? The naked day will come to-morrow, and the hungry crowd begin again to draw the sea of existence with their thousand nets. And then the moonlight night will hardly be remembered, but as thin film of unreality made of sleep and shadows and delusions.

*Mālini* is a short play, less than a third of the length of *King and Queen*. It has no under-plot, a great gain, since Rabindranath's under-plots are so much brushwood, inserted, one guesses, because Elizabethan plays so often had them. It is translated fairly faithfully, except that its long beautiful speeches are cut down and the first scene's opening, in which Malini receives the sage Kasypa's last instructions, is omitted. The chief faults that can be found with it are that it is sketchy, and that, as in so many of his plays, plot and construction are elvish in their twistings in obedience to an informing idea. One may complain, too, of a sameness about his plays. There is usually a rebellion, and his rebels have a strong family resemblance—'Cæsar and Pompey are very much alike, especially Pompey'. Had *Mālini* preceded *Sacrifice*, Kshemankar would have seemed like the first study of Raghupati. Also his plays have kings always ; and the girl towards whose slight significant figure all actions and characters sway is constantly present—the moon governing these tides of trouble.

But the character drawing marks an advance, although Malini herself is a very unconvincing figure till towards the end, where she wavers from her half-attraction towards Supriya, drawn by the quiet fierce strength of Kshemankar. Indeed, one scene—that where by her simple appearance she wins over the Brahmans who are clamouring for her banishment—is almost ridiculous ; it could not have happened, could not be credible, unless with someone a

hundredfold more alive and dominating than this shadow-girl. But the other characters are well drawn, for example, the Queen who, after chiding her daughter, defends her from the King's rebuke. Supriya, the man who goes against the convictions and habits of a lifetime, is better still, and Kshemankar best of all; the finish, from the time when he enters in chains, is very moving, and the last action unforeseen. The talk between him and Supriya, who has betrayed him because a more imperative loyalty claimed him, loyalty to the truth incarnate in Malini's glowing eyes, is one of the most touching things Rabindranath ever did.

Why does Malini plead for Kshemankar, after he has killed Supriya? When I spoke of the play as sketchy, I was thinking of the way in which Rabindranath, in Malini herself, suggests questions for whose solution he provides no data. He has drawn the lines of her figure so tenuously that her thoughts and actions are seen as if moving through a mist of dreams.

It is very difficult to be quite sure—so many interpretations are possible—but in Malini there seems to be a conflict. She is torn between two impulses—or perhaps an ideal and an impulse, the life preached by Gautama and the other life of love and friendship. Both were vague, I think. Was she in love with Supriya? Or was it Kshemankar? Or was she in love with neither? I do not know; but you feel as if there were a deeper conflict.<sup>1</sup>

The poet has given us no means of judging, but has left *Mālini* a beautiful but faintly drawn outline.

<sup>1</sup> Mahalanobis.



## THE LAST RICE

*Chaitali* gives the gleanings, the finish of a brilliant period. He was thirty-five when this period ended, and had reached his climacteric. The poems were almost all written in the months of *Chaitra* and *Srāvan* in the years 1895 and 1896. *Chaitra* corresponds to March and April, when the sun, waxing daily fiercer, is burning out the last sweetness of Spring; *Srāvan* is July-August, the season of torrential rains. *Chaitali* is a late rice which is gathered in *Chaitra*. The book's name suggests its significance for his career and also the month which produced a great part of it.

*Pictures and Songs* was *Chaitali's* forerunner; had something of its atmosphere, but came far short of its repose and depth. The poet is now mature. Youth is over, with its passion, its ardours and exultations. The 'high midsummer pomps' are finished, and it is autumn, the fruit-tide, which is at hand, as his opening poem, the *Dedication*, implies.

But the mood of *Chaitali* chiefly carries us back. It represents the evening glow of his purely literary days. There is an undercurrent of sadness, the eternal tragedy of things passing away. The evening light is golden, is calm and serene, but it is fading. It lightens whatever it touches. It isolates. Even a trifle, a speck of dust, is set aglow by it. The subject-matter is often trivial—a girl tending a buffalo, a day-labourer returning from work, an emaciated beggar. But each is transfigured, into a flitting glimpse of the eternal passage of Nature.<sup>1</sup>

The poet's mind is at leisure, in one of those great periodic pauses which come to creative activity. It is not yet ready for the new tasks which await it, and in this quiet interval may as well glean in finished fields. The absence of effort communicates itself even to the form. Of

<sup>1</sup> Mahalanobis.

the seventy-eight pieces, all except eight are written in the medium which Rabindranath adapted from the sonnet, and reserved for oddments of poetic experience which have lain to his hand, deserving of not too arduous shaping. It is just seven rhymed couplets, the sonnet with all its difficulty shirked, and necessarily with much of its dignity gone. Sometimes the effect is as thin as in William Morris's lazier couplets, of which he is said to have once composed over three hundred and seventy in a day. But usually in *Chaitāli* Rabindranath has made his simple basket carry an abundance of beauty.

I have spoken of the atmosphere of leisure, the restfulness of a life at temporary pause, with nothing to do but observe. Much of the book was written in 'our house-boat at Kaligram. The boat used to get very hot, so I sat at the window and watched'.<sup>1</sup> The following poem, not one of the best, puts us at once where we can see the setting:

Dawn fresh and clear ! Along the placid river  
 A chill wind blows, setting its face ashiver ;  
 The geese have come not to the waterside ;  
 No boats have launched, with snowy sails spread wide ;  
 No village-wives have come, their pots to fill ;  
 The fields of man and ox are empty still.  
 Alone, before my open window, I  
 Sit, with hot brows bared to that mighty sky ;  
 The wind with loving touch my hair caresses ;  
 The gracious sunlight wraps about and blesses.  
 The birds have poured around their songs of glee,  
 Rocking the blue heavens on a nectar sea.  
 Blessed am I, who watch the sky's fair light !  
 Blessed am I, who love an earth so bright !

Out of a group of studies of lowly life, he has translated three in *The Gardener*.<sup>2</sup> The English reader can see how touching they are. Another, *Karma*, presents the patience of simple Indians ; by telling it, the poet rebukes himself far more severely than by many words of contrition. His servant is late, his bath is unprepared, his comforts are

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> Nos. 77-9.



not ready. He fumes, resolves to be stern, and receives the offender angrily. The latter stands, 'looking like a fool', then with folded hands of deprecation says, 'Last night, at midnight, my little girl died'. Having so spoken, he turns quickly, and automatically takes up the day's labours.

Another poem tells of the saint who mistook self-centred uselessness for religion. I give a closer version than the translation in *The Gardener*.<sup>1</sup>

Said an ascetic, at the dead of night :  
 'I leave my home, to find my God aright.  
 Ah, who with shows of sense has chained me here ?'  
 'I', said his God—idly, to that dull ear.  
 His wife his sleep-sunk babe clasped to her breast,  
 Drugged by excess of happiness to rest—  
 'But who are you, Illusion's cheats ?' he cried.  
 'I', rose that Voice unheeded at his side.  
 Going, he called, 'Where art thou, Lord ?' His Lord  
 Made answer, 'Here !'—vain voice, and wasted word !  
 His dreaming child cried out, and clutched his mother—  
 'Return !' the God commanded. But that other  
 Was passed from call.

'There goes my worshipper',  
 The God sighed, 'wandering from me, none knows where !'

*Chaitālī's* characteristic poems, however, are just pictures. *Drought* opens a series of beautiful poems, close in observation, often powerfully imaginative in imagery, though in *Drought* itself the imagination is more on the level of the merely intellectual, observation sharpened with slight sarcasm :

By love of woman lured, in days of old  
 The Gods from Heaven descended, I am told.  
 That age is past. The rainless fields today  
 Are scorched, the river's dried in *Baisāk'*<sup>2</sup> ray.  
 A peasant-lass again, and yet again,  
 Utters her anguished plaint : 'Come ; pouring rain !'  
 Restless with expectation, towards the skies  
 She lifts from time to time her pleading eyes.

<sup>1</sup> No. 75.

<sup>2</sup> April-May.

But not a drop descends ; the deaf wind blows ;  
 Whirling the fugitive clouds afar it goes.  
 The sun all moisture from the atmosphere  
 Licks up with blazing tongue. The age is here  
 Of Guilt, the Gods are old—for woman's prayer  
 Now none but mortal man has any care.

Another typical poem follows, *The Unknown Universe* :

Into your midst but for a moment born,  
 O boundless Nature, yet not all forlorn,  
 Naming you Home and Mother in simple faith !  
 This eventide your claws and teeth that scathe  
 I see, while like a yelling fiend you race,  
 Hurling your mother-garb to empty space,  
 In tatters shredded, through this *Baisākh* storm  
 Flying on wings of dust, an awful Form,  
 To uproot my life like grass ! I ask in dread,  
 ' Who art thou, mighty Terror, that hast spread  
 Thy thousand arms and gripped me round about,  
 The endless sky at every point shut out ?  
 My momentary life who carried hither ?  
 And why am I at all ? Must journey whither ? '

But the most characteristic of *Chaitālī's* pictures are (of course) of river-scenery. *A River-Trip* has this sleek photograph :

Heavy with rain, the river, like a satisfied infant, sleeps silently, with waveless filled body.

Two beautiful poems celebrate the *Ichchhamati* ('The Wilful River'). Another directly praises by name the *Padma*. Its opening thought is the fanciful one of a poet's nuptials with a river, and the poem ends with the most Indian of all moods :

How often have I thought, sitting on thy bank, that if in some after-life I return to this earth, if from some far-off birthplace I come, and row a boat on thy swift stream—passing village and field and reed-clump, passing sandbank and crumbled cliff—when I reach this spot some deep consciousness will wake that a hundred times, in another life, I came to this lonely bank ! Then, in that evening-tide, on this same bank will there not be sight and speech between thee and me ?



His descriptive vein flows unmixed, in the opening lines of *Noon* :

The mid-day dream !<sup>1</sup>

Snared with fat weeds, the shrunk penurious stream  
Is stagnant ; sits upon a half-sunk barge  
A kingfisher ; two cows beside the marge  
Browse in a fallow field ; an empty boat,  
Tied to the landing, idly sags at float ;  
Damp muzzle tilted to the burning skies,  
And all its soul at rest in its soft eyes,  
Soaks, plunged in peace, a wallowing buffalo ;  
On the deserted *ghāt* a sun-drowsed crow  
Bathes, flapping ; dances on the margent green  
A wagtail ; insects flaunt their various sheen,  
And float aloft, or sink at intervals  
To the damp moss ; with strident, honking calls  
(Strayed from the hamlet hard at hand) a goose  
Prunes with wet beak its snowy plumes profuse ;  
A hot wind rushes, bearing of burnt grass  
The fragrance—far afield its fierce gusts pass ;  
On the still air the yapping quarrels sound  
Of village dogs ; or Peace a voice profound  
Finds in the bellowing kine ; at whiles arise  
Screechings of *mynās*, pipal's wearied sighs ;  
Shrill keen of kites ; or the tormented scream  
Of the wrenched boat at sudden tug i' the stream.

Note how fine these pictures are, stroke added to stroke till the soul of the quiet scene is captured. This quality is the chief new thing in *Chaitālī*, and one of his gifts to Bengali poetry. He commented to me on the ignorance of bird and flower among his countrymen. 'You ask, "What is that bird? What is that flower?" They reply, "Oh, wild bird, wild flower."' Indian nature poetry has an immense lot to learn. Its insipidity has been partly due to incessant chatter about 'flowers', 'lotuses', 'trees', as if the heavens and earth and the infinite variety of them were created in jest, that we might pass them by. Much of Rabindranath's early poetry suffers from this smudged indeterminate observation. In *Noon* he

<sup>1</sup> *Dream* is not in the Bengali.

has carried close and detailed observation far beyond the point reached by any predecessor.

Three other features of *Chaitāli* remain for consideration. One group of poems glorifies the past, as the contemporary political movement did ; and by so doing leads up to the political pieces of the book. In this group are two sets of sonnets, elaborate and sonorous in diction, addressed to Kalidasa. For his many tributes to Kalidasa he always brings his most sounding language and stormiest comparisons. Best of these poems is *The Birth of the War-God*,<sup>1</sup> which has noble music. Kalidasa's audience are Siva and Parvati, with their train of ghosts and demons :

When the poet chanted his *Song of the War-God's Birth* to the two deities, the ghost-world stood round, the slow peaceful clouds of evening descended on his head, the lightning-play ceased, the thunder was silent, the young war-god's peacock stood motionless beside Parvati, with tail depressed, bending its arched neck. Sometimes the lips of the goddess grew tremulous with soft laughter, sometimes a long sigh breathed unnoted, sometimes the swelling tears showed in her eyes. Finally, a troubled shame silently descended on her eyes—you, O poet, looking into the goddess's eyes suddenly ended, with song unfinished !

Many hold that only part of the *Birth of the War-God*, in the Sanskrit text as we have it, is by Kalidasa, the rest, indecent and inferior, being by another hand. Rabindranath, picturing the sudden clouding over of the charmed goddess's face with shame, as the song changed to worse and to bolder, and imagining Kalidasa as closing abruptly, makes it clear that he, too, rejects much of the poem.

Even more sounding is the diction of another set of sonnets in this group. These are the ones that celebrate the greatness of Ancient India. Rabindranath at this period was a great hymnist of the past and decrifier of the present. He tells us that he looks on Ancient India, and sees a vast forest filling the land, from east to west. Everyone, apparently, is king or warrior or hermit. The kings are ruling with tremendous majesty, or laying aside their crowns to learn wisdom at the feet of forest-sages.

<sup>1</sup> The title of a poem by Kalidasa.



'Elephants are trumpeting, horses are neighing, conches are being sounded.' It is all splendid. Added years, working through the poet's abundant sense of humour, made him aware that there must have been common people even in heroic times, and that presumably they were doing something, perhaps even working hard, while their betters were ruling or meditating or riding their noisy and glorious quadrupeds. Yet even in these years of early manhood it was not its supposed material prosperity which drew him to the past, as it did so many of his compatriots, but its touch with Nature. He glorified Ancient India for her 'Message of the Forest', and surely with reason.

After this magnification of Ancient India come the two most significant sections of *Chaitali*. The book looks forward very distinctly to his next decade, in a handful of angrily patriotic poems; and looks further still, in two or three definitely religious ones. The patriotic poems scold his own people; in this there is nothing new, but he scolds them now for imitation of foreigners, for suffering contamination from another civilization, and not for faults inherent in their own. These pieces make no pretence of being poetry. His diagnosis is too vague for the fierceness of his invective, and his Motherland might not unreasonably ask for more detail. One piece pours scorn on those who wear European clothes; the subject hardly deserves a poet's serious wrath, and the rhetoric is forced. Another finishes with the bitter epigram:

You have seventy million sons, O fond Mother. You have made them Bengalis, but you have not made them men.

Lastly, in one or two lyrics we have the only definitely religious expression of the book.

Another lyric, entitled simply *A Song*, with a lightness such as he never fails to get at his best hides beneath imagery, as under flowers, the definite and conscious acceptance of middle age. For it is middle age that has now reached him, and *Chaitali* is but the 'late rice' of the unexampled harvest of his youth.

His songs remain for consideration. It is by his songs that he is best known ; they number close on two thousand, of which about three hundred belong to this first creative effort, in addition to many included in *Mānasi* and other books. They vary in length, from three or four or even two lines—mere snatches, a haunting phrase thrown on to a floating air of music—to fifty or sixty. Their themes are the eternal ones, and especially his own themes—Autumn the crowned Queen, Spring the Dancer, the Seasons, the changing Earth, the boatmen and the river, the Rains, flowers, birds, tears, laughter, the lover going to keep tryst, the beloved waiting. These themes are handled with an easy quality of melody, a quality which is more than deftness. Sometimes it is hard to say if the song is popular for the words or the tune ; or it can be sung without any meaning, the tune itself bringing the meaning. 'There can be no question', said the poet to me, 'that I have conquered my people by my songs. I have heard even drivers of bullock-carts singing my latest and most up-to-date songs.' And he laughed in his tremulous pleased way. The villages had other songs, but in Calcutta and in educated circles elsewhere everyone sang Rabindranath's. The Brahmo Samaj was a great agent in their dispersal, for Brahmos are enthusiastic music-lovers and wherever there is any sort of Brahmo community there is a cult of song. One large section of his songs, his *Brāhmasangit* or 'hymns', has been a great factor in Brahmo religious life. Ninety per cent of the hymns used by the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj are his, which makes it the stranger that members of this community should have fought hard against his election as an honorary member, in 1921 ; the young men carried the day, writing pamphlets 'Why we want Rabindranath'. The Adi Samaj used about five hundred of his hymns, including songs from *Gītānjali*. His *Brāhmasangit* were written throughout his career, in the same steady way as his secular songs.

Some of his songs became well known, because vendors of patent medicines annexed them to advertise their wares.



Some were popular because patriotic, written amid the fervours of the rising nationalism of the opening decade of this century; these were sung in chorus by students—greater popularizers of Rabindranath's songs than even the Brahmo community—and by political processions. Some were popular because moral and didactic. Most of the songs are good, and especially good as *songs*—meant to be sung, and, as a consequence, sung rejoicingly by a whole people. This manipulation of a few stock motives with constant freshness is astonishing; and, repeatedly, a splendid line flashes out. 'She brings sleep with the voice of the cicadas, in the flowery wood flooded with moonrays', he says of Autumn, in that dancing lyric, 'The World is charmed with the lyre of the Universe'—of Autumn who has just loomed before us, in his picture of her, with the crescent moon entangled in her hair. Of the rain-filled Jumna, he says 'The impatient Jumna, heaving with waves and shoreless, wearing a silken robe of darkness'. 'The pale lamps flicker in the wind of dawn, the yellow moon has passed to her setting', he sings, in 'Thou hast spent the night wakeful; thine eyes are tired, O beautiful One'—a very popular song.

These quotations are taken from songs written before 1896. But he was always writing songs, many of his later ones being among his best. In May and June 1922 he wrote over fifty songs—an activity by no means exceptional when the mood took him.

His songs come in for further consideration under the titles of some of the collected books of songs, such as *Gitānjali*, *Gitimālya* and *Gitāli*.

*Chaitali* closed this first lap of his poetic race. Hitherto, his achievement had been predominantly lyrical: even the dramas have a lyrical ground, especially *Chitrāṅgadā* and *Malini*. They have dramatic qualities, as we have seen, but that is not their highest excellence; this is rather in the lyrical cry, the note which is heard in the Sannyasi's fierce soliloquies, in the ecstasies and despairs of Chitrāṅgadā, in the eddying passions round Malini's dim goddess-form. This quality appears pure in the songs and the best poems

of *Cbitrā*, *The Golden Boat*, and *Mānasi*. His reflective and descriptive power finds expression in *Chaitāli* and *Pictures and Songs*: and the two gifts, the lyrical and the descriptive, mix throughout. In his later work, he hardly surpassed his expression of these, but he kept his gift of song, he learnt to draw with deeper sympathy the sorrows of humble lives, and he added a power of mystic interpretation of religious experience which the whole world recognized as exceptional. Also, in at least two books, *Kathā* and *Palātakā*, he showed a fine gift of verse narrative. With *Chaitāli*, twenty years of steady production came to their finish, in a series of detached pictures of a world from which he was passing to new experiences and a new attitude.

*Chaitāli* was followed by a period of pause, the only considerable one in all his restless crowded career; he seems to have felt that he had reached a turning-point. The few poems of the next two or three years may be taken here, as outliers from the mass of work that, in the brief and unambitious sketches of *Chaitāli*, has just sloped gently to the plain. Then we reach a new main range as the century ends.

The first collected edition of his poetry appeared in 1896. The next two years are the obscurest of his career, and his name appears in hardly any public connexion. He was writing comparatively little; and, after the astounding record of the last decade, it would not have been strange if his brain had rested for half a century. In 1898, he became editor of *Bhārati*, a post which he held for one year only, during which he ran the paper with great vigour, writing a good half of its contents. As we have seen, there was not much space for outside contributors when Rabindranath Tagore took over a magazine. Sixty per cent of his contributions have not been republished.

*The River*, a poem of three hundred lines issued in 1896, is almost the only poetical work of this period. It would not be easy to find a better children's poem; it might be set, with delightful results, in every Bengal school, to teach the beginnings of geography, of natural history, of



agriculture and economics. The metre is an easy rippling one; the diction is simple, with enough—but not too much—repetition and with abundance of onomatopœic words. We are taken through the whole course of an Indian stream. We see with starry clearness the snowy peaks of its birth; the bearded wild goats; the deer of the forest *terai* that fringes the Himalayas. Then the widening stream flows through jungles where sharp-tusked boars tear up the earth, and plains where white paddybirds haunt the banks. It reaches the broad green ricefields, passing mango-shaded villages and temples of Siva, with their evening worship, their gongs and summoning bells. All this the poet brings briefly and swiftly before us. We see the *ghāts*, we see the sandbanks, with their tortoises and muggers. Last of all, the water grows turbid, then blue, the air is salty, we feel the spray and see the flying spume and spindrift, and are face to face with

Murmurs and scents of the infinite sea.

Such a poem, in a land so vast that many have not had a chance of seeing the sea or the snows, or anything but clusters of hamlets, would be an education for a child. Its only vestige of a fault is an occasional repetition of an image or phrase which has been used too often by this poet, as when it speaks of the ascetics, with their matted hair, sitting on the bank 'as if painted'. In its unambitious fashion it provides moments of poetry, the more effective for the easy brevity with which they are just touched in and then passed over, as the unresting stream flows on. There is the tidal flood 'swelling like a python', with sleek gorged body, as the sea comes up; there are the stone steps of the bathing *ghāts* and landing-stages coming out again, when the tide has fallen, 'like breastbones'; last, the sea itself inspires adequate imagery:

As children who are free from school  
Come playing, running, leaping,  
With shouts the winds come sweeping  
And rolling over the waves.

The tired river is home ; and the sea, like a mother,

On a blue bed makes it lie down,  
And washes off the mud-streaks brown ;  
Wraps it in robes of foam ; and sings  
Songs in its ear, pushing all stain  
Afar of labour and of pain.  
All day, all night, held in that deep,  
Unfathomed love, the Stream will sleep.

His next three books of any importance all suggest the same temporary lull in poetic impulse. *Gorāya Galad—Radically Wrong* (or, *Mistaken from the Beginning*)—is another of those social comedies, of which *Vaikuntha's Manuscript* is the most brilliant. Rabindranath was living in Calcutta in these days, and the book presents quite a faithful picture of metropolitan life. Where it fails is in jumbling up farce and serious purpose ; parts are dully didactic. Another social comedy, *The Bachelor's Club*—later called *Prajāpati's Decree*—gives a great deal of witty conversation, and shows that its author never ceased to be an extremely clever man, even when his poetic powers were resting. The play, a long one, appeared in *Bhārati* in 1900.

At the beginning of 1900 he published *Kanikā*. The title, which means the sawdust and chips of a workshop, disclaims all ambition. The book contains a great many epigrams of two or four lines, and a score of pieces varying between four and twelve lines in length, which are gnomic apologues such as the East has loved from the beginning of literature. Most of the latter are familiar already in Aesop and Indian fabulists before Rabindranath. They tell how the pot wished that the well were the sea, that he might be brimmed in that vastness, and was assured by the well that it held quite sufficient water for *his* small needs ; how the buffalo wished to be a horse, and quickly tired of being groomed ; how the handle denounced its union with the ploughshare as the cause of all its trouble, only to repent when the share left and the peasant burnt

\* The Hindu Hymen.



it for useless wood ; how the hornet bragged that his sting was more poisonous than the bee's, and the wood-goddess comforted the latter with reminder that the hornet could not boast of superiority in honey ; how the tailor-bird pitied the peacock for having to carry such a heavy tail, and the latter advised him to save his distress, as the tail brought glory ; how the axe-head begged a handle from the *sāl*-tree, to beg no more afterwards but to proceed to cut down its benefactor ; and other similar fables.

The reader may run through a handful, and decide for himself whether they are beautiful or dully obvious.\*

(1) *Watchfulness.*

We shut the door, lest Error enter in.  
But Truth asks, 'How shall I admission win ?'

(2) *The Pot and the Kettle.*

The club says 'Walking-stick, you paltry cane !'  
And 'You fat club !' the stick hurls back again.

(3) *No Gain Without Disadvantages.*

'I will raise mud no longer', vows the net ;  
The fisher says, 'A lot of fish you'll get !'

(4) *We Cannot Alter Fact.*

Turn and twist the body as you will,  
Left hand is left, and right is right hand still.

(5) *Doing One's Best.*

'Who will take up my work ?' asked the Setting Sun.  
Hearing the question, the Earth remained silent like a picture. There was an earthen lamp, which said : 'Lord, I will do what little I can'.

(6) *Misconceptions.*

Night secretly fills the forest-branches with flowers, and goes away. The flowers, waking, say, 'We are the flowers of Dawn'. Garrulous Dawn says, 'There is no mistake about *that*'.

(7) *Labour and Rest.*

Labour and Rest are bound by closest ties,  
For Rest falls lidlike upon Labour's eyes.

\* I have supplied titles.

(8) *Self-Advertisement.*

Saith the false diamond, 'What a gem am I !'  
I doubt its value from that boastful cry.

(9) *Kindness and Gratitude.*

'Who art thou, silent one ?' Eyes tear-bedewed  
Give Kindness answer, 'I am Gratitude'.

(10) *The Game of Life.*

The game of life both birth and death comprises :  
To walk, our instep falls no less than rises.

(11) *The Retort.*

Saith the End, 'One day everything will end ;  
Whence, O Beginning, thy boasting is in vain !'  
Saith the Beginning, 'Nay, even there, O friend,  
Where there is finish, I lift my head again'.

(12) *Self-Conceit.*

Swelling with pride, the moss cries, 'I to you—  
Tank, note it down—have giv'n a drop of dew !'

(13) *Passing Away.*

Wails the *Sephāli* : 'Star, I fail ! I die !'  
Answers the Star : 'My work is finished quite !  
Flowers of the forest and stars of the sky,  
We filled the Basket of Farewell for Night'.

(14) *The Vanity of Lamenting.*

If the night mourned the vanished sun, return  
He would not . . . but the stars would cease to burn.

(15) *The Inalienable.*

Says Death : 'I take your son' : the Thief : 'Your gold' ;  
Says Fate : 'I seize on all you have and hold' :  
'And I', the Slanderer says, 'your name destroy' .  
'But who', the Poet asks, 'can take my joy ?'

(16) *Love and Renunciation.*

Love says : 'Renunciation, your creed is one of lies !'  
'You are the chief illusion, Love', Austerity replies ;  
'To those who seek salvation, I say, Your own good shun' .  
Love answers : 'After all, then, you and I are one !'

(17) *Private and Public.*

The Moon says : 'Freely abroad my light is strown ;  
But flaw and fault scar my own face alone'.



- (18) *The Carefulness of Mediocrity.*  
Careless may Good beside Most Vile be seen :  
But Mediocre keeps a gap between.
- (19) *The Difference.*  
Condescension grumbles : ' I give, yet nothing gain ' .  
Compassion says : ' I give, still give, of nothing fain ' .
- (20) *The Law of Liberty.*  
The Dream boasts, ' Free, I walk in no law's round ' .  
' Then are you false ' , says Truth.—' But you are bound  
With endless chains ' , the Dream says.—' That is why  
I am known as Truth ' , the Truth says in reply.

*BOOK III*

1898—1905

UNREST AND CHANGE





## *A TURNING BACK TO THE PAST—DRAMA AND VERSE NARRATIVE*

UNIVERSAL restlessness was the most important thing in Indian history as the nineteenth century ended. Just as the last years of Elizabeth's reign saw Parliament breaking away from a dictatorship under which England had achieved glory, so the close of Victoria's sixty years of imperial expansion saw an increasing discontent of peoples asking for much more than security and peace within the mightiest empire the world had seen. At first it was unrest and fierce speaking, not revolt. Then the deep-rooted legend of Britain's invincibility was shocked by the South African disasters. The war dragged on ingloriously. Clouds gathered over Europe; England was seen to be unpopular, and saved from attack by her fleet alone. In the East, Japan had arisen, and soon was facing Russia. And now, as so often, it was poets who proved 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world', the moulders of a nation's thought. Bengal, that had produced so many poets, was the centre and capital of Indian unrest. During the middle ages, its people had patiently endured the oppression of petty Moslem lords, as they acquiesce in the caprice and cruelty of the skies and rivers. 'Ah, what can we do, father? It is written in our foreheads.' But the fiercest wave of national feeling now ran in Bengal; and in Bengal Rabindranath's figure towered.

He was not a nationalist, as the term is generally understood. His attitude even then was substantially what it was when he wrote his *Nationalism*, a score of years later. Freedom, the absolute unfettered right to control their own destinies, was what he sought for his people; but he cared nothing that they should be welded into a political unity, such as European nations had. In a general way, he



must have been aware of Tolstoy's teaching, which was permeating the world; but there was little conscious borrowing, only unconscious kinship of mind, in his deep dislike of militarism, his distrust of organization, and his enthusiasm for the peasant. He believed that both parties, those who supported and those who opposed the Indian Government, were obsessed with thought of government, which was why he wished that the alien Government were out of the way. He deprecated the slavish begging for 'boons', and deprecated equally boycott movements. He would not ask Government help, even for hospitals and education; he would not reject such help if offered, or complain if it were withheld.

He believes in serving his country in constructive work; hence his emphasis on village work, sanitation, and social reform. He believes in India, in her future possibilities as well as in her great past, but does not believe in nationalism. India's greatness consists in her recognition of *human* values—in her message of social civilization. He believes that the only permanent solution of international conflicts lies in the recognition of this fact, that socialization is the way out. He has always insisted that this has been India's message throughout her history. He does not believe in political freedom as an end in itself. *Swarāj* is desirable because it will accelerate a more intimate socialization—a more organized unification of India, and hence contribute to the saving of Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Inevitably his political attitude has always been a strangely detached one. A clergyman on the Indian Ecclesiastical Establishment, after listening puzzled to a friend of mine who was trying to explain to him that Rabindranath Tagore was a considerable literary man, asked one question only: 'But is he loyal?' Well, *was* he loyal? Was there any reason *why* he should be loyal? The chaplain's question has bothered men more practically concerned with it, men harassed with the task of administering wide districts. Rabindranath's sense of fairness, his ability to stand aloof from his own people and to see the other side of a controversy, his lack of interest in politics except where they touched the deeper life of India—these things are plain

<sup>1</sup> Mahalanobis.

enough to us, looking back on his record. But the British official could hardly be expected to appreciate nice distinctions, when there was over them the veil of a difficult foreign tongue. All he could see, as a rule, was that in his rowdy class one boy was making more noise than the others. When *Dharma Prachār* was published, he could gather that a riot of anger had been aroused, and he could tell a certain person, alleged to be a poet, to keep quiet. It is not always possible in India to follow Gallio's wise example.

Rabindranath twice made startlingly effective appearances in public life—when he led the agitation against the Partition of Bengal and when he resigned his knighthood after Amritsar and gave expression to Indian indignation.

He believes in protesting against injustice in the name of humanity, not in the hope of gaining concessions or as a political weapon or to create race-feeling, but simply because it is a fundamental moral duty.<sup>1</sup>

And now, as the new century began, he was extremely busy in public life. He wrote a great deal, and his speeches stirred the blood as no other man's did. His activities were under the pressure of strong moral compulsion, and were very far from being always popular. It is a tribute to his people as well as to him, that they should have listened to a prophet who scarified their shortcomings so pitilessly. He was striving for political freedom, that his people might the more swiftly do away with social injustice among themselves.

His political activities are not our theme. But they affected his poetry, by taking his time, so that we no longer find him attempting work on the scale of his earlier dramas. They did not at first make any great appearance in his poetry—that came a year or two later, in *Naivedya*, when the withdrawal to Santiniketan gave his mind the chance to look back over excited days. But they had the immediate effect of a landslip on a stream; the waters gush out in many places, but there is no steady flow or direction. Further, his platform speaking and magazine writing were

<sup>1</sup> Mahalanobis.



responsible for a certain thinness of quality in much of the verse of this period. *Kābini* is an exception, perhaps the greatest poetry he ever wrote; but *Kābini* is brief. On the whole, the poetry of this period, though full of beauty, helps one to understand why Milton let poetry rest during his years of controversy. The second-best a great poet can always command, and the second-best is beautiful. But at least one great poet, forced to choose between the second-best and silence, chose silence.

I take *Kalpanā* first, as the book which breaks away least from his earlier style. It was written between 1897 and 1899 and issued in 1900. Though it represents a time of transition, its technique shows no hesitation or uncertainty. As *Balākā* stands at the head of his work for metrical freedom, so *Kalpanā* is pre-eminent<sup>1</sup> among those books which are written in regular stanzaic forms; its abundance and its variety of ordered forms are very great. It remains to be added that not one of his books has been more travestied in 'translation'.

Manner and matter, as well as form, have variety. Practically every one of his many moods is represented, if by but one poem. His new orientation in political matters appears along with his old wrath against certain sections of his own countrymen, in *Signs of Progress*, where the satire is bitter. He sees an obsequious crowd waiting and asks the reason. Is it some great national hero, whose presence has drawn all these rajas and maharajas and notables? Oh, no. 'The sahib who has stuffed his pockets and his belly is going. All these great folk have come to set up his statue and grieve.' The next sign is a wretched neglected man. What sin is he expiating? Just this: he is a poet who has crowned his motherland with deathless praise. Next, we are shown the Durga *Pujā*, the worship of the national goddess. Suddenly a mob of poor onlookers are driven away. Why? Those great folk, 'Mackay, MacKinnon, Allen and Dillon have left their businesses'—'shops', says this aristocratic poet, scornfully—and

<sup>1</sup> I am speaking of technical perfection only.

have brought their lotus-feet with vast pomp to the *pūjā*. After this, he pours contempt on the wearers of foreign garb, and on the 'patriots' who conduct their meetings in English; and his fiercest scorn of all on the 'meek shaven pandit' who explains how all modern science is hidden and anticipated in the Hindu scriptures and customs, his 'educated' audience rapt in delighted agreement. These people are very learned, of course? Not at all; they know nothing whatever, their only skill being with the long bow of imagination. A few may have read one or two elementary Sanskrit books, getting the rest of their knowledge about their own literature and religion from Max Müller.

But there are gentler patriotic poems of tenderness and beauty. *Asha, Hope*:

Mother, my sun had set. 'Come, child', you said;  
You drew me to yourself and on my head  
With kisses set an everlasting light.  
About my breast, of thorns and blossoms plight,  
A garland hung, Song's guerdon—in my heart  
Its pangs burnt deep; your own hand plucked apart  
The barbs, and cleansed of dust, and did bedeck  
With that rekindled loveliness my neck:  
You welcomed me, your son to endless years.

Rising, I lift my lids heavy with tears:  
I wake! I see! And all a dream appears!

*Banga-Lakshmi* has been quoted by me already.<sup>1</sup> Here are some lines of *Autumn*:

Today, in the autumn dawn,  
Did I see your lovely form,  
O my Mother Bengal, your green limbs glowing  
In stainless beauty?  
The brimming river cannot flow,  
The fields can hold no more grain,  
The *duel* calls, the *koel* sings,  
In your woodland court.  
In midst of all, you are standing, Mother,  
In the autumn dawn.

<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 2 of this book.



*The Mother's Summons* uses the old vernacular imagery, the ferry and the lamp. I quote its first stanzas :

Standing at your door,  
Again you are calling, Mother.  
Evening comes down on your heath,  
The Earth spins into darkness.  
Call 'Come, come to my breast !'  
Call in your own compassionate speech !  
That word will waken compassion in our hearts,  
The body's veins will sing in reply ;  
The careless and frivolous, whoever and wherever they be,  
Will startle, hearing.

The love-lyrics are many. It was a happy fate which made his second English book largely a selection from two of his pleasantest and easiest books, *Kshanikā* and *Kalpanā*. *The Gardener* won a deepened popularity for him. Some of *Kalpanā's* love-poems are extremely popular as songs, known everywhere and to everyone. Then, there are some charming fantasies. There is *Betrayatee*,<sup>1</sup> the story of how from the beginning all creation had indulged in what must be called one prolonged flirtation. The poet wandered amid the world, but was unheeded. His silence made him taken to be mad or, at best, foolish and unobservant :

When the moon with its gaze drank the lotus's love,  
Seeing the poet, it laughed : 'He knows not the language  
of eyes !'

When the water-lilies their soul to the wood outpoured,  
They thought : 'He cannot tell what meaning in fragrance  
lies !'

The lightning, kissing the cloud, thought, as it flashed on its  
way :

'How should this madman guess what hides in the fury of  
fire ?'

Trembling upon its bough, the *mālātī*-creeper mused :

'I know, and the tree, we two, the language of whispered  
desire !'

But there came an evening when this dumb person found  
a noisy tongue. The sun was just about to set, the moon

<sup>1</sup> *Lover's Gift*, No. 17.

was rising; men were returning home, women were watering plants.

Loudly the poet sang: 'O men and women, hear  
Through all these years what secret doings were hid from  
sight!  
Who would have dreamed of it even? The moon stares down  
on the pale  
Brows of the water-lily, sleepless aloft all night!  
On the Mount of Rising the sun stands, and the lotus wakes—  
All these years they have wrapt their secret in cunning  
guise!  
His incantations the bee has hummed in the *mālatī's* ears—  
Has hummed, their meaning unguessed by your pandits,  
though never so wise!'

Hearing, the sun dropped down, and reddened the sky with  
shame;  
'The moon behind the forest's curtain slipped his' head;  
Hearing, the lotus hurriedly closed her eyes on the lake;  
'Whew! we are all found out!' the south wind told her,  
and fled.  
'Shame! O Shame!' moaned the boughs; the creeper  
trembled, and shook;  
They wondered: 'What mischief next will by this babbler  
be uttered!'  
'This fellow who seemed to be dumb can open his mouth  
wide enough  
In slander of other folk!'—to the jasmines the black bee  
muttered.

After this, though the poet watches carefully, he never sees anything. Creation has grown wary.

There are two pieces about Kama, the Indian Eros. Rabindranath takes up the story of how Siva with a glance burnt Kama to ashes; and gives us one poem descriptive of Kama's triumphal progress in Spring, before he became 'the bodiless god', and another of things as they are now. Both are lovely. The first is full of grace, showing the god and his votaries with the clear outline of frescoes, 'as if painted', to borrow a favourite phrase of Tagore's. The

<sup>1</sup> The moon is masculine in Indian mythology.



second manifests the poet's characteristic subtlety of thought. The ashes of the bodiless god have gone into the great winds, are carried everywhere in the veins of the universal life, and are all-pervading :

Ascetic, what hast thou done, burning the Five-armed One ?

Thou hast scattered him through the world !

His pain more troublous sighs in the wind and restlessly flies ;

His tears roll down the heavens.

The universe thrills to the keen of the Love-God's anguished Queen ;

The world's four corners wail ;

In *Phālgun* suddenly, at sign from a god none see,

Earth shivers and swoons.

Whose robe do I see adrift, in the moonlight-flooded lift ?

Whose eyes in the still, blue sky ?

Whose is the face with gaze veiled in the shining rays ?

Whose feet on the grassy couch ?

Whose touch, when the flowers' sweet scent brims the mind  
with ravishment,

Like a creeper entwines the heart ?

Burning the Five-armed One, Ascetic, what hast thou done ?

Thou hast scattered him through the world !

After Kama, it is right that he should remember Kama's comrade Vasanta—Spring. He does so, in one of the most exquisite poems he ever wrote, of which a meagre précis may be found in *Lover's Gift*.<sup>1</sup> Ages ago, Spring opened the south door of Paradise, and came to Earth, bringing his blossoms 'drenched in the golden wine of the hot sunrays'; and men and women, maddened with his presence, pelted one another with flowers. Year by year, at the same wild season, the poet feels his vanished youth again :

My immortal anguish, Spring, remains

In your murmured sighs ;

In the red sun, Youth's burning passion stains

Your evening skies.

I conclude with the greatest poems of *Kalpanā*. In this book, his mind, while turning away from the last of the old life, is gathering up its various powers. He is drawn forward to a sterner and more terrible effort. Storms attract his spirit more than ever. When Radha goes through the rain to her lover, though she has made this pilgrimage so often in his poetry, she goes now through an air hissing with hot rains and fiery with the serpents of lightning. Night in her noiseless chariot aloft has an aloof majesty far different from the old softness of his moonlight.<sup>1</sup> This mood of solemn power finds its climax in two poems, which show the influence of Shelley's *West Wind* ode.

In *The Year's End*, he says good-bye to the tired year and his own old self. This is his greatest land-storm, as *Sea-Waves* is his greatest sea-storm. The Bengali year ends in our April, as the hot weather begins to grow to its fulness; and it usually closes with a brief spell of stormy weather. This is the season when most of the festivals in honour of Rudra,<sup>2</sup> the terrible God, are held. A footnote tells us that *The Year's End* was written on a day of tempest, in 1898. The observation of natural phenomena is superb, from the first stanza, with its

On the bamboo-copse at the village-end the ink-blue shadows  
are wavering and swaying,

The long arrows of rain are striking.

The second stanza shows the cattle and peasants scuttling to shelter, the terrified boats dropping their sails and running to shore. The Universe finds a voice, and shouts through the rents in the clouds, through the pouring rain. He remembers Shelley's 'pestilence-stricken multitudes' of hectic-bright leaves driven before the blast, and that poet's soul like a 'dead leaf thou mightest bear'. He cries to his song:

Whirl them afar, let them fly, the many-coloured shrivelled  
wasted leaves,

In thy mighty breath!

<sup>1</sup> See *Fruit-Gathering*, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Identified with Siva, the 'Ascetic'.



That is the finish of stanza three. Stanza four gives us an image characteristically Indian :

With mingled joy and terror, shouting with weeping and  
ecstasy,  
With crazy lamentation,  
Binding the anklets of the storm on her feet, let the mad Spirit  
Of *Baisākḥ* dance !

The poem is not flawless. It is too long—seventeen eight-line stanzas—and stanzas 14 and 15 moralize too much. He spins out fine things ; and even the best things, such as the storm's lunatic 'dancing', have a suggestion of being old friends. But the music is stormy and shattering, the inspiration at a uniformly lofty level. Stanza 15, which I have mentioned as slightly spoiled by moralizing, ends with a redeeming couplet :

Bring me face to face with mighty Death,  
In the light of the thunder-flash !

The last stanza is a quiet ending :

Unpausingly on the new-sprouted forest of sugarcane  
The rain is still falling ;  
On the unending path of the clouds Day has gone,  
From darkness into darkness ;  
At my opened window, amid the steady showers, the crickets'  
noise,  
And the dear fresh fragrance of the earth,  
I have finished the song of the year's end, and lift it, my  
offering,  
To the sky of the night.

*Baisākḥ* is a still finer poem (though not a greater storm), grandly concentrated. It is in a succession of five-lined stanzas, that have the effect of a series of thunder-claps. The Sanskrit diction, grave and rolling, culminates in crashes that burst round the reader like a tempest of shrapnel. There is hardly room for the image of man, 'whose breath is in his nostrils', a flickering shadow on Nature's battleground ; there is only the swift, stern might of the tempest, gathering over the scorched earth

and through the burning air. He cries to the God of Destruction :

O Dreadful One ! O Terrible *Baisākh* !  
 With rough, brown, flying, matted locks, gray with dust,  
 With hot body weary with the heat, lift to thy lips  
 Thy shattering horn, and blow !  
 O Dreadful One ! O Terrible *Baisākh* !

He revels in this visitation of Siva, and rejoices that the month did not come with flowers and gentleness.

*Kalpanā* sums up his previous achievement in style and on the whole there is no real overloading of matter by ornament. He is rarely an austere poet ; but in *Kalpanā* his main theme is generally at least as fine as the subsidiary beauties with which he decks it out. Very soon after *Kalpanā* his work fell under the spell of that superfluity of secondary detail, which made it so disappointing, in spite of its constant beauty.

The next two books continue his imaginative interest in the terrible, and begin to show how the political atmosphere was invading his poetry. There was a revival of the heroic legends of the past. Not only the heroes of the ancient epics, but historical figures such as the Sikhs and Sivaji the Maratha were recalled, to brace the national effort to cast off an alien rule. Rabindranath's mind felt back, and found these stories in the past and used them. But his treatment of them shows how secondary an interest politics was for him. His poems cut to the root of what was to him a more demoralizing subjection than the temporary phase of the British occupation.

I take *Kathā—Stories*—first, though it is a slightly later book than *Kābini*, with which it was bound up later. It belongs to 1900, with the exception of two pieces written in 1898 and one written in 1908. The stories are chiefly of Buddhist times and the Sikh and Maratha efforts and the Rajput struggle to keep independence, and must be regarded as a very effective part of his political propaganda. Some are direct swinging poems, little more than vigorous patriotic pieces.

<sup>1</sup> He identifies the month with Rudra, the Terrible God.



The value of *Kathā* is that it shows Rabindranath's narrative gift with a simplicity and directness not found in his earlier essays in this line. Two horrible Rajput stories exemplify this. *Holi-Play* is as squalid as anything in Scottish history. It tells how a Rajput Queen invited the Afghan Kesar Khan to hold *holi-festival*<sup>1</sup> with her. Delighted, he dresses himself for a gallant's part and comes with a band of followers. Amid the flowery groves of *Phālgun*,<sup>2</sup> they engage in mimic battle with a hundred Rajput ladies; the red juice flies, love-banter is exchanged. But the Afghan notes that the Rajput ladies stir no intoxication, that their voices are harsh, that the dancing is out of step, and the anklet-tinkling is out of tune. Presently the Rajput 'Queen' flings the pot of *holi-juice* in his face; the blood rushes out, blinding him. Feminine dress is tossed aside, and massacre begins. For the transformation of the Rajput 'women' into treacherous foes, an appropriately sinister image is used:

Like a hundred snakes from flowers,  
A hundred heroes the Afghans surrounded.

*Marriage* touches deeper springs of pity and horror. A summons to battle breaks into a Rajput wedding; the husband goes, the marriage rites unfinished, and his wife follows. Sombre and grand is her arrival at night, to find her betrothed slain and lying on his pyre still in his bridal dress. She is burned with him and the poem finishes with a scene grimly magnificent—the patient child sitting with the dead man's head in her lap, the joyous attendants shouting praise, priests signifying clamorous approval:

The fire flares up, and hisses—  
Sits the girl in meditation—  
Triumph rings through the burning-ground,  
And women's exultation.

*Sacrifice*, the last poem I shall take from *Kathā*, is another study of superstition and of its children, cruelty

<sup>1</sup> A festival in honour of Krishna. Red liquid is flung on people's clothes.

<sup>2</sup> February-March.

and fear. A woman whose first two children died when babies, and whose husband died just after the birth of another child, is assured that her misfortunes are due to sins of a previous birth. In great humility and with unwearying persistence she worships the gods, performing every possible deed of merit. When her only child falls very ill with fever, a priest brushes by her momentary bitterness with assertion that in this evil age people have no real 'faith'; he reminds her of the heroes of old—of this one who had immediately cut his son to pieces to feed a god disguised as a hungry Brahman, of that one who had fed a similarly-cloaked deity with flesh from his own breast. In each case the loss had instantly been made right. In his boyhood he had heard from his mother of a widow who had devoted her only child to Mother Ganges; and the goddess had appeared, and restored the child. That night, alone with her dying son, the distressed mother hears a distant roll, the Ganges flooded with the tide. Of course, the Mother will be merciful and will save!

' Child, there is a breast  
Cooler than is your mother's.'

Distraught, she goes with her suffering child to the *ghât*. The night is peaceful and lovely, moonlight sleeping on the swelling waters. She puts her baby on the lowest step, then prays; and a vision comes to her:

Shark-borne, in dazzling splendour She has come.  
She lifts the baby to her breast, his brow  
Crowned with a lotus! He, one laughter now,  
In happy beauty seeks with hands outspread,  
His mother's, not the Flood-Queen's breast!

She said—

That smiling goddess—' Take whom I restore,  
Unhappy One! Your treasure take once more!'

The hysterical woman opens her eyes, crying, 'Where, Mother, where?' But there is only the glorious beauty of moonlit heaven and sleek, rising water, which has covered the step where the child lay:



The night, intoxicated with the moon ;  
 The Ganges, flowing past with rippled tune—  
 ' You will not give him back ? ' Rang out a cry—  
 The south wind touched the woods with murmuring sigh.

*Kāhini*—*Tales* consists of five dramas and two or three semi-narrative poems. Of the dramas, *Karna and Kunti* was written in 1899; *A Sojourn in Hell*, *Sati*, and *Lakshmi's Testing*, belong to 1897. *Gāndhārī's Prayer* is left undated, but is the earliest of all. *Lakshmi's Testing* (*Trial by Luck* is the poet's own rendering) is much the lightest. It is written in tripping rhymes, swift in their effect and, no doubt, in their doing; a pleasant fantasy, ruined by inordinate length. The English version is easier to read, and in places wittier, than the spun-out Bengali text.

The other four dramas are all short. Each takes as subject the violation of some natural affection, in obedience to a social rule or the teaching of convention. Mr Mahalanobis points to Browning's work, and adds :

They are studies of men and women placed in very difficult emotional situations. It is not drama, because there is very little movement. One might almost say that it is an instantaneous cross-section of a powerful dramatic movement—something like a *snapshot* of a real drama. We get only a glimpse. We see the actors only in one particular situation. Nothing happens—we just see them.

This acute criticism requires modification. For things do happen—happen in *Sati*, for example.<sup>1</sup> But the summary is substantially just. The drama of these plays, though they are more living than his earlier ones and far less just the vehicle of ideas, has the disadvantage of being drama without a background, except what is supplied by narrative which is obviously explanatory; but all four plays contain moments of tense and terrible drama, presenting the clash of attitude, the conflict of aims and ideals, in men and women who are acting and suffering under very high emotion.

<sup>1</sup> Also, it should be added that the plays are an analysis from a modern standpoint.

Mr Rhys gets his 'piece of sculpture' at last, in the earlier part of *Gāndhārī's Prayer*, or *Mother's Prayer*, as the poet prefers to call it in English—an unfortunate title.

Duryyodhana, who has won by trickery and sent his kinsmen into exile, faces his father. Says the father, Dhritarastra: 'You have attained what you sought?'; to which the son replies, parrying the challenge, 'I have attained success'. To the further query, 'Are you happy?' he returns the evasion, 'I am victorious'. Then rhetoric wars with rhetoric, as the father pleads for a righteousness banished with the Pandavas, who today go into exile:

Today behind the distant forest's screen  
In faded splendour sets the waning moon  
Of the Pandavas—

as the son extols the doctrine of brute strength. The friendly dominance of his cousins, that checked his ambition so long, is a thing of the past:

That five-peaked mountain of Pandava pride,  
Which blocked my front, has fallen.

The English version<sup>1</sup> omits some pages of Duryyodhana's insolence, with gain, on the whole. But by this omission it loses what was traditional, the weakness of Dhritarastra as a father and his responsibility for the full-grown *hybris* of his son. In the English, Dhritarastra's action seems beautiful, a father's love refusing to let his child go deserted into the wilderness of wrong-doing.

A spy enters, to announce that the whole populace are at the gates, sorrowing at the Pandavas' departure. The new king answers loftily:

'They know not  
That Duryyodhana is watchful! Wretched fools!  
Heavy with clouds, their evil day has come.  
'Twixt king and subjects from today will be  
Acquaintance close and bitter! Their old defiance—  
Vain swelling of a harmless serpent's hood!—  
I'll see how many days will last—this hissing  
Of arrogance that bears no weapons.'

<sup>1</sup> His phrase for *Chitrāṅgadā*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Fugitive and Other Poems*.



The episode, which has no dramatic value, has been omitted in English.

The king's mother is announced, and Duryyodhana withdraws. Passionately she prays Dhritarastra to renounce their son, and by a father's command send him into exile. The dialogue between father and son has been pompous on the one side, stately and stiff on the other; often unreal and even feeble. But, as so often in Rabindranath, with the woman a gust of burning feeling fills the stage. Dhritarastra refuses her prayer: 'Our son is renounced by God; therefore I cannot renounce him'. He cannot save him, so will companion him in his ruin. Gandhari is left alone, and speaks; and in her words the voice of countless unavenged wrongs, the oppression of the weak crying for justice, finds utterance. This speech is the fiery crest of the play. One can guess dimly with what burning of heart it was read, written in the time of national awakening and national bitterness of aspiration and humiliation. She looks to the day when all her children will lie stretched on the battlefield; and exults because over her own utter desolation justice will be triumphant at last.

Woman, bow your head down to the dust! and as a sacrifice fling your heart under those wheels! Darkness will shroud the sky, earth will tremble, wailing will rend the air. Then comes the silent and cruel end—that terrible peace, that great forgetting, and awful extinction of hatred—the supreme deliverance rising from the fire of death.<sup>1</sup>

Few of his poems are more truncated in translation than *Gāndhārī's Prayer*. The thirty-two verse lines of his speech are thirteen and a half lines of prose in the English. With it the poet closes the play, as he has presented it to foreign readers. He did wisely. The Bengali has nearly six pages more, an anti-climax, introduced to drive a moral remorselessly home. The weakness of *Gāndhārī's Prayer* is that its passion is so spun out, and watered with so much that is gnomic or merely edifying. So now, at the end, that we may see the whole picture and have nothing left to the imagination, Duryyodhana's wife comes in decking

<sup>1</sup> The poet's own version.

herself with jewels confiscated from the exiles. Gandhari exhorts her suitably but vainly, for Bhanumati has her gaze fixed on the important fact that her husband has won, and that there are, and ought to be, spoils. After her exit, the five Pandavas and their wife seek their aunt's blessing before departure. They obtain it, in a very long and noble speech, a special benediction falling to Draupadi, the wife.

*Sati—The Faithful Wife*—reproduces part of the theme of *Gāndhārī's Prayer*, in deeper sterner outlines. Again, it is a father who shows mercy, and a mother whose purpose is pitilessly fixed. But here, though the father is weak, it is not in his mercy, for there all humanity, all justice speak one way, but in his vacillation and feebleness of deed ; in *Gāndhārī's Prayer* the mother's sternness was pleading for a higher pity, whereas in *Sati* the mother is a slavish demon. In *Sati* Rabindranath indicates that a woman's way is to stand by what she has been taught, and that she is slow to waver from accepted standards.

He has chosen a situation tense with challenge of established social morality. Ama, who had been carried off and married by a Musalman lover, meets on the battlefield her father, who has slain her husband. Humbly but proudly she replies to his reproaches ; and suggests that she too has received wrongs, perchance deeper ones :

Your daughter if today you cannot pardon,  
O father most revered, I beg that you  
A widow's pardon will accept.

Her tears move him, and in mid-sweep of his condemnation he breaks out, 'Damn those tears!'—masculine unwillingness to see a beloved woman weeping. He advises pilgrimage, to drown her sorrows ; but her thoughts are with the dead, and with her infant son. 'Leave me alone, leave me alone', she exclaims. 'Bind me not with your cord of love ! Its strands are red with husband's love !' He answers sadly, recognizing that the past has vanished irrevocably :

Your father's child no more !  
The fallen flower to the forsaken branch  
Returns no more ;



and he goes over the incidents of that evening when her Musalman lover had forestalled her appointed bridegroom, and carried her off. That night father and foiled suitor had sworn vengeance. The latter has died in the battle just ended, and a terrible thought strikes him :

Jivaji, in this night of battle dying,  
A hero's passing won. He is your lord,  
O widow ! Not that thief who slew your virtue !

Her answer is proud and passionate. Shame on words crueller than the deed that has killed her husband ! Her virtue—the Indian word is *religion*, the implied charge being that she has sullied the purity of her caste—is unstained, for her love went to a man who proved worthy, though now enemies traduce him. Her mother enters and we reach the terrible climax. Finely contrasted are the three figures ; the father whose heart yearns towards his child ; the mother, so enslaved by system that she can take none but a severely conventional view of what is life and truth and purity ; the daughter, in whom a true woman's loyalty is erect and steadfast, though alone. One recalls Morris's Guinevere, in similar peril of the fire :

Still she stood right up, and never shrunk,  
But spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair !

' Pure as yourself ' , she replies, to her mother's shuddering injunction to keep those impure hands away.

The drama becomes the warring of spirit with crude materialism. Rama the mother knows only one test of true wifehood, willingness to be bound on the funeral-pyre :

Then light the pile !  
There lies your husband on the battlefield !

But Ama refuses to accept this man, who never won her love, as her husband, whatever pledges others may have given for her. This scene is terrible to any sympathetic reader. Rama's crude words,

' With his today your ashes shall be mixed,'

remind us that there is no unimaginativeness which is so dreadful as a woman's. It is no wonder that the real bond had been between father and daughter. Vinayak speaks, in words of ineffable tenderness bidding her return to her infant son. His harsh task—a mistake, as he begins dimly to see now—is done; her life, he sees, is no dead branch, but has sent out new roots. But Rama is inexorable; she commands the soldiers to light the pile, and seize her daughter. One word is all the latter utters in her distress. 'Father!' she cries; and he is at her side, as so often in her childhood's terrors. Yet alas! he says, that she should ever have to call her father to save her from her mother! Love and pity overflow in his words, and he brushes aside these laws of men which sever love from love, and father from child. But he is as weak as most of Rabindranath's fathers—*mother*, if a foreigner may judge, seems to mean more to a Bengali mind than ever *father* does. Rama, sheer fiend in her pitiless resolve, calls on those other slaves, the soldiers of dead Jivaji. They respond with alacrity, crying that the woman belongs to the dead man who is waiting for the last rites. 'Bind old Vinayak', says their leader, with contempt on the *old*; and the girl is tied to the pyre, which the soldiers light, shouting her praise. Thus should their master pass, with a woman's tender form perishing in agony beside his lifeless body. Ama breaks into hysterical appeal:

Awake, awake, awake, King of Justice!  
 Thou Lord of the burning-ground, awake today!  
 See what rebellion in your mighty realm  
 Mean foes are making! Waken, God of Gods!  
 Strike with thy thunder! O'er this paltry *justice*<sup>1</sup>  
 In thine eternal justice rise victorious!

With dreadful irony the play closes, the soldiers shouting 'Blessed, blessed *Satī*!' as they laud the woman for her

<sup>1</sup> The word means *religion* also. Her first appeal is to *Dbarmarāja*, King of Religion, in his capacity as Judge of the Dead. Then she cries to Siva, the Great God, King of all burning-grounds, and appeals from man's religion, in the name of which she is to be tortured to death, to his eternal religion.



'faithfulness' to the man they choose to regard as her lord.

From his English translation<sup>1</sup> the poet has cut clean away the last interchanges of passion, so that the reader is left uncertain what happens. Partly by these, when the final count comes, his fame will stand. Not all our pity goes one way. This, surely, is one test of the dramatist. There is pity for the victim of bigotry and chains of social custom, but greater pity for the king whose folly has brought things to this bitter pass, where he cannot save his own flesh and blood, crying to him, from the *karma* of his own train of action. Greatest pity of all for the soldiers—they know not what they do—and for the Mother, whose woman's spirit has been so seared with slavery.

*Narak-Bās—A Sojourn in Hell*—brings beneath the acid of his questioning two of the most universally accepted of conventions, the priest's sanctity and the king's honour. He presents criticism in the guise of a story, his favourite method; and, showing up spiritual insolence for the cold devil it is, he marshals all our convictions against it. And 'honour', a weak fool's conception of some fancied loyalty due to his own evil caprice, such 'honour' as Herod showed in murdering John the Baptist, is shrivelled in this arraignment.

Nothing could be better than the atmosphere of vagueness, a misty region of voices as of Dante's Hell, with which *A Sojourn in Hell* opens; the King checked on his way to Heaven, while the lamenting Shades flock about him, begging him to stay awhile, that they may rejoice in the suggestion of Earth's dewy flowers and seasons which hangs around him still. Among them is Ritvik the Brahman, a swollen scarlet Pride, strutting vanity and unshakable complacency in his every word; he insists that the King descend from his chariot, and stay in Hell as his companion. Scenting a tale of sin, the Shades are eager to hear it. The King tells of the son who came after many prayers and of his absorption in the child to the neglect

<sup>1</sup> *The Fugitive and Other Poems.*

of his other duties, till one day he accidentally slighted the great Brahman. Thus far, the theme is a familiar Indian one; but the treatment which follows is not so familiar. The Sage exacts from the King, as penance, the sacrifice of the innocent cause of the offence. Some of his words are almost too horrible to quote. Of the appalling burning which he contemplates, he says :

' Your wives, snuffing his marrow's scent and smoke,  
Will bear a hundred sons '.

The Brahman forces his way into the zenana, insolently confident that he stands above good and evil, sorrow and affection :

' knowing all scriptures, I  
Know well the heart's compassions are a lie '.

He breaks in to where the child is hidden :

Shielding the boy, the women shut him round,  
Even as a flower screened by a hundred boughs.

The speech is too long, too sentimental for its dreadful theme. Nor is the tale convincing. No man could have torn the child from the grasp of so many who are represented as bent on holding him—everyone, priest and layman, man and woman, aghast at the projected murder. A narrative way more in keeping with the elementary technique of probability could have been found. The King is represented as neutral and inactive, in desperate wretchedness; yet his order might have made the Brahman's success plausible and the same sense of 'honour' which gave permission would have given command.

All the poet's tender love for children is flung into the lines which tell how the Sage raised a pyre and burnt the trusting child. The child dances in his arms, 'fascinated by the godlike splendour of the blaze'—a picture as vivid as Homer's, of Hector's boy delighted with his father's helmet. The agonized King cries out against the story's being finished. Hell shouts in pity and horror that Ritvik is not fit to be among them. The charioteer would drive on—why should the King be made to suffer so? But he,



in anguish of remorse for the deed which he had permitted, tells the charioteer to leave him here. God may forgive him, but he will never forgive himself, and his place is beside his fellow-fiend. The Judge of the Dead makes majestic entrance and reminds the King that all Heaven is expecting him ; the agony of repentance which followed his crime has atoned for it. Ritvik interferes, proud and untouched with pity or remorse, the eternal Brahman, most arrogant of all Earth's aristocracies. He *chooses* that the King remain with him ; if his companion in that awful deed goes to Heaven alone, then for the greater criminal will be double Hell, in his undying hatred of the King. So the King says he will stay, till Ritvik's guilt is expiated. The Judge of the Dead consents, adding that his choice crowns him with glory. And may, he says, 'The flames of Hell become your Heavenly Throne !' The piece ends with an infernal chorus of exultant admiration ; with gloomily impressive similes, of the King and Priest :

Yokefellows on the burning crest of pain.

These two (say the Ghosts)

' shall lift above the pangs of Hell  
An endless blazing light unquenchable '.

This finish seems slightly incongruous, as though the dramatist had at the end given place to the satirist who has stood at his elbow throughout but has never been allowed to come quite forward.

The clearest mirror of his mind at this time is given in the piece which remains for consideration. He was passing, as we have seen from *Gāndhārī's Prayer*, through his classical period, such a period as Wordsworth's when he wrote *Laodameia*, *Dion*, and the *Ode to Lycoris*. The themes, except in the case of *Sati*, are taken from Sanskrit literature or from Hindu mythology, but the treatment is essentially romantic.

*Karna and Kunti*, like *Gāndhārī's Prayer*, borrows its theme from the *Mahābhārata*. There it was a tale ; here it has become very much more. It is but an episode, a

dialogue ; yet such an episode as makes the brain work with compassion, with the old Norse pity for human beings at odds with each other, slaying each other with sorrow of heart, yet helpless to do otherwise, for Fate would have it so. These plays are 'imaginary conversations' ; but Landor's are seen for what they are, wavering figures on the wind-blown tapestry of a poet's vision, compared with this passionate interview of *Karna and Kunti*. It recalls that vignette where

Night came down over the solemn waste,  
And the two gazing hosts, and that sole pair,  
And darkened all.

Kunti, the Pandava Queen, having borne Karna before marriage, to hide her shame deserted him at birth, to be brought up by Adhirath, the Kaurava charioteer. The child has become a man, and leader of the Kaurava host, now about to fight their hopeless battle against the Pandavas. Kunti sees him, and finds him in worship of the setting sun on the Ganges' banks. She says, 'I am the woman who first made you acquainted with the light to which you offer worship'.<sup>1</sup> Bit by bit she brings him to see that she is his mother, and the mother of Arjuna, his rival. Nothing can surpass the tenseness of this picture, of two souls, one agonizing for the love which her act had forfeited, and which she would give everything, even her reputation, to recover, the other poised and prepared for the finish he knows at hand. It is framed in such an atmosphere as the poet loves, of spreading darkness and of lights one by one sprinkling the night. In this pause of world's effort everything can be weighed ; not one pang is spared to either sufferer. For a moment Karna wavers :

Between the din of to-morrow's battle and the awful hush of the battlefield this night, why does there come to me a message of forgotten motherhood through the voice of the mother of Arjuna, and why does my name find such music on her tongue, drawing my heart towards the Pandava brothers ?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Fugitive*.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*



But he recovers, and in words terrible in simplicity shows her what she did; the gulf of severance which she set betwixt him and those now his mortal foes, whom he should have loved as brethren, and her cruel robbing him of a mother's love:

Only tell me why you have come today, to call me back to the ruins of that heaven which you wrecked with your own hands.<sup>1</sup>

She begs his forgiveness, freely bestowed; begs him to return to her and his brethren. Even so Rustum, drawn to the young life before him, offers Sohrab sonship and safety with him. But neither can desert the host who have trusted him and followed him to war. For Karna there are closer ties still, the motherhood of adoption.

The living bond of kindred which you severed at its origin is dead—it can never grow again. And shame be on me if I hasten to call the mother of kings my mother and leave my mother of the charioteer's house!<sup>2</sup>

The terribly punished queen bows in acquiescence—the wheel has come full circle, and the son she wronged has returned to slay the sons she owned and cherished. But here Karna undeceives her. For him remains on the morrow ruin and death. He is Achilles knowing that his doom must be accomplished, hearing the voice which whispers 'Die soon, O faerie's sonne'. Nor can the reader refuse the term Homeric to this fragment—nay, no fragment, but a complete moment, as the gods see events in time. Great in his pity and forgiveness, greater in his resolve and fixity of purpose, Karna makes his decision:

On the night of my birth, you left me to disgrace in the naked world of the nameless—leave me once again without pity to the calm expectation of defeat and death.<sup>3</sup>

And here, as in *Laodameia*, *expectation* bears its nobler Latin meaning, the simplicity of a soul at watch and waiting, whose

bosom heaves and spreads, her stature grows;  
And she expects the issue in repose.

<sup>1</sup> *The Fugitive*.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

I have quoted from the poet's superb English paraphrase. I now turn to the poetry of the original. When Karna has his momentary hesitation—he is looking towards the tents of his foe, where his own home should be :

There shall the motherless his mother gain  
For evermore ! There shall the polestar burn  
Through Time's long night in your frank, lovely eyes !  
Speak, Lady ! Call me once again your son !

As recollection of his intolerable wrong helps him to gather together his wavering purpose, while still he remembers in pity who is sharing that blackness with him—in what anguish—he says :

Your shame has touched me, piercing this dense night,  
Silently touching all my limbs.

Here is the mother's cry when she realizes how completely she has lost him ; remember, he was her first-born, though born in shame and then deserted.

I left you to your curse—though to my breast  
I took five sons, my heart was sonless still !  
Alas ! for you my arms throughout the world  
Range ever, wandering still in search of you !  
And that wronged child, for whom my heart has lit  
Its lamp, has with the offering of himself  
Performed his evening worship, not to me  
But to the spirit of the Universe !  
Yet am I blessed today—I have seen your face.

And this is her last cry :

The little child  
I left that day in its small helplessness—  
Who guessed it would return in hero's form,  
Walking the ways of night, with pitiless hand  
Lifting against its mother's son a sword ?

These plays are not faultless. *A Sojourn in Hell* is patchy, as well as capricious, its action lies entirely in the past and is only narrative now ; both it and *Sati* suffer, as drama, by the intrusion of long passages, inserted prologue-fashion, though well on in the poems, to give information of events long anterior. The poet hesitates



between two aims, the dramatic and poetical, with something less than complete success in both. *Gāndhārī's Prayer* wearies with a certain coldly intellectual quality, with the absence of any sort of real clash in the meeting of father and son, with its iteration of lessons of morality, and with long passages which are expository only; and even *Karna and Kunti* rouses suspicion of its plenary inspiration, especially in the foreign reader, by the way the poet freely discards fine things, substituting finer in his translation. One can hardly imagine Shakespeare setting aside

If ever thou didst hold me in thy heart

and finding another way, as though the first expression had been accidental and secondary. But few poems in any literature more justify Aristotle's test of tragedy as a purgation, than this group. The reader feels, as he could not confidently feel in the earlier dramas, that the poet has started with a situation and a story, not with an idea only. All four plays have not only moments of intense passion, but a magic directness of language, a power to drag the very heart-depths with pity.

The plays are all in the 'halting' rhymed couplet which the poet praised to me as giving the freedom of blank verse with the difficulty that the artist needs. This, as I have indicated earlier, has a freedom which goes beyond that of the ordinary enjambed couplet; often the rhymes are not noticed till after reading for some time. After *Karna and Kunti* Rabindranath gave up verse of any kind, as a vehicle for drama.

## NEW MEASURES: RELIGIOUS POETRY

So far as publication goes, the books of this period—*Kanikā*, *Kathā*, *Kāhinī*, *Kalpanā*, *Kṣhanikā*—are almost contemporaneous. But, just as the slightness of the form and the content's freedom from any deep feeling or thought justify the placing of *Kanikā* with *Chaitālī*, as the last eddies of the retreating tide of his first great creative period, so the new manner and tone of *Kṣhanikā* justify us in regarding it as the opening of his later work. It was often impossible to find out when Rabindranath wrote a poem or a book, and he was the last person who could give any help, for he did not know. He was firmly of belief, for example, that he wrote *Kathā*, *Kalpanā*, and *Kāhinī*, at the same time as *Chitrāṅgadā*. In this case, the evidence was abundantly against him, as he reluctantly admitted. But his conviction is of value, as showing that his own mind realized that these three books belong in style and matter to his earlier work, despite the accident of their coming a few years after. Further, though all the 'Five K's' were composed more or less contemporaneously, there is little doubt that *Kanikā* represents their earliest phase, when his mind took up the tools of verse again and began by fashioning trifles, and that *Kṣhanikā* came last, when his style—to change the metaphor—swung abruptly into a new channel. Part of the reason why *Kṣhanikā* was his own favourite work is that it represented such a newness and such freshness of outlook and freedom of spirit.

*Kṣhanikā* by its title—'What is Momentary'—suggests a lighter mood and manner and choice of themes, the poet's tentative entry on his later work. The book was revolutionary in style. No man, as Ajit Chakravarti observes, can jest in Sanskrit; the poet in the muses'



name boldly seized the colloquial tongue. For the first time, he used extensively the *hasanta*, or truncation of a word by omission of a vowel last syllable. This *hasanta* is abundant in the common speech, to which it gives force and brevity, but the pandits have held it to be undignified. Yet by reducing the super-abundance of vowel-sounds which make Bengali a soft rather than a powerful tongue, it gave Rabindranath's verse a ruggedness and craggy strength. Dr Johnson condemns Collins's Odes as 'clogged with consonants'; but it is possible for a tongue to be too loose with vowels and liquids. Rabindranath, in *Kṣhanikā*, by a stroke of perception of philological genius, placed himself in such a position as Chaucer had, when he could revive or slur over at will those light final e's which were about to fall off from the language like withered leaves. This meant an extraordinary access of resource to him as a lyrist. He could make the verse soft and musical, by a full use of all its vowel-strength; or by the use of *hasanta* he could give it a sharp break, as of a rock outjutting amid musical waves, and provide the voice and rhythm with something to ripple against. 'Obstructed by the pebbles of *hasanta*, the tune dances.' This became his usual style, and the book was a watershed, sending men's opinions definitely streaming to the side of freedom and progression in literature, or of tradition and stagnation. Rabindranath's new style completely conquered in the end, and became dominant.

In *Kṣhanikā*, I first found my language. In *Evening Songs*, I first found my genius; before that, I had echoed other men's songs. In *Mānasi*, I first used compound letters, as equivalent to two *mātrās*.<sup>2</sup> But in *Kṣhanikā* I first realized the beauty and music of the colloquial speech. That gave me an extraordinary sense of joy and power. I felt I could use absolutely any word I chose. Readers were amazed. There was very little criticism; they were all silent. They did not know what to make of it; many of them thought it was perhaps a practical joke. There had been nothing like it in our literature

<sup>1</sup> Ajitkumar Chakravarti, *Rabindranath*, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> A prosodic refinement which need not be explained in this book.

before. But now we are flooded with it. Satyendra Datta<sup>1</sup> and all of them write in this style.<sup>2</sup>

But many of his admirers, for the time being, were nonplussed. Here was a book whose title disclaimed all earnestness; even Ajit Chakravarti complains that it is hard to know when the poet is serious. 'Ajit', said the poet to me, 'misunderstood *Kshanikā*. He was too metaphysical, like so many of my people. In *Kshanikā*, there is merely my enjoyment in the creation of forms—that is what he could not understand. There is no thought, no doctrine, no subject—simply enjoyment. I enjoyed my freedom.' *Kshanikā* was his favourite book. He kindled as he spoke of 'the gracefulness and lightness of its lyric movements'.

But Ajit Chakravarti has an excellent phrase, when he speaks of *Kshanikā* having a spirit 'of mockery of his own pain'. As often, intense earnestness shows itself in an apparent cynicism. The poet plays for a space, between the two great activities, that of his earlier worship of beauty and the one, about to begin, of worship of God. But he never trod on firmer ground. Under all momentary hesitation, there is a certainty of his genius, a sureness as to his destiny. The greatest Indian poet since Kalidasa, he knows that the language is plastic in his hands, that he is moulding far more than metre. He has learned to trust his *jibandebatā*, knowing well that he is never less in danger than when he trusts his instincts. He is looking far ahead, to a time when neither pandits nor popular dramatists will matter.

Coming close to the life of his time, Rabindranath had been disillusioned and saddened. Noise and brag were all around him, and growing commercialism. He wanders in a beautiful country of his imagination, playing in distant times and parts of his land. One of the loveliest pieces, *In Old Time*, is a laughing leisured description of the charming ways of ladies in Kalidasa's day.

<sup>1</sup> His most skilled and famous successor. He died, aged forty, in June 1922, 'the Bengali Swinburne'.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation.



In Kalidasa's days  
 Had I been born, be sure  
 Some charmer would have caught  
 This captive in her lure.  
 In Spring's high festival,  
 To flute's and *vinā's* call,  
 Seeking the screening wall  
 Of forest-groves aflower,  
 On some white *Phālgun*-night,  
 Drunken with youth's delight,  
 I should have won her sight  
 In the King's picture-bower !  
 Craftily would be caught  
 Her skirt on a spike, and torn—  
 In Kalidasa's days  
 Had I been born !

The poem is delightful, foolery which never ceases to be fine poetry. In his luxurious lament, he remembers that these ladies are dead. These ladies whose names are music—as he says, in lines which recall Rossetti's maidens, whose names 'are five sweet symphonies' ;

One is Mandalikā,  
 And one is Chitralikha ;  
 Manjulika, Manjarini,  
 Musically chime.  
 Beneath a *Chaitra* moon  
 They would seek the bowers—  
 Would strike the *asok*-branches,  
 And fill the woods with flowers—

they are gone. But we have ladies today. They are educated, they wear foreign shoes ; they are modern, and would have shocked Kalidasa deeply. Yet, after that first shock, the great poet would have taken a second look, and would have found that look not unpleasing. So why should not the present-day poet, while sighing for the melodiously-named dead, recognize his consolations, and make the best of them ? Kalidasa would have done the same ; Rabindranath feels sure of that famous man's approval :

So in this present bliss  
   I preen, and dance around—  
 I am here, while he  
   Is dead, and underground.  
   The fragrance of his age—  
     I snuff its sweetness yet—  
   But not a whiff of mine  
   Can that great poet get !  
   Fair to this age of mine  
   This learned lady seems,  
   Though not her picture even  
   Was in the great bard's dreams.  
     Dear, from your tender eyes  
       I beg a gracious glance !  
   And, conquering Kalidasa,  
     I preen and dance.

The mood of *Kshanikā* is seen at its most rollicking and defiant in *The Drunkard*.<sup>1</sup> *Two*<sup>2</sup> shows his humour at its best, in a poem as light as the thistledown. The English version has by no means lost all the beauty, but much of the delicate charm has vanished, by the way in which the particular has become general—the *Bhagavatgita* becoming the vague 'lessons', and so on. A couple of lines of notes would have made all clear to readers of average intelligence ; but Rabindranath never expected to find such in England or America. In the same group of poems are pieces which appear as No. 19 in *Lover's Gift* and No. 43 in *The Gardener*. These are full of mischief, are examples of his favourite sport of pandit-baiting. Fooling has not often produced better poetry.

This lightness of tone marks nearly all the love-pieces ; the love is a literary or imaginative passion, with hardly a trace of deep feeling or hint of a real experience. But it is hard to see how the elusive joy in a wind-blown skirt or in bright eyes glimpsed for a moment could find better expression. The book is packed with spring, with warm, pleasantly languorous days and sudden gusts of eddying wind, with calling birds and dropping blossoms, with

<sup>1</sup> *The Gardener*, 42.<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 44.



fragrances. Such a poem as *On the Road*<sup>1</sup> brings out his sensitiveness to sharp sounds, to the pitcher striking on the stone *ghāt*, and the water lapping on the steps. He misses very few sights, taking in his landscapes feature by feature. To all this his new-found command of metre is an effective auxiliary. *On the Road* has a finely lazy movement, fitting the day it describes. This, of course, must be lost in any translation; but in many cases he loses more than he need. *Boldness*<sup>2</sup> is very loosely paraphrased, with such gratuitous tawdrinesses as 'winds are rampant in your hair' and 'in your dark eyes the coming of the rain finds its music'. Closer examination of such insertions, sins of commission which bulk largely even beside his enormous sins of omission, nearly always shows them to be by no means so fine as appears at first sight.

Nevertheless, some of the most charming poems have kept in English enough of their beauty to let the reader guess how good *Kshanikā* is. It was rightly felt by many, when it appeared, that *The Gardener* contained a new and delightful Tagore, a love-poet of grace and fancifulness. In that book Nos. 2, 10, 11, 14, 16, 17 (which has all the attractiveness of a folk-song), 18, 38, 39, 40, 43, 44, 46, 54, and 55, are all from *Kshanikā*.<sup>3</sup>

But *The Gardener* has not only these lighter pieces, but includes many of the wistful later poems of *Kshanikā*, poems which look forward to the mood of *Gītānjali*. These deeper moods give *Kshanikā* variety, when it is in danger of creating an impression of monotony, owing to the sprinkling of pieces which are hardly more than literary exercises and to an unfortunate uniformity of method, such as the use of refrains in practically every poem. However, it *has* the variety. If such a piece as *Want of Leisure*<sup>4</sup> reminds us of Suckling's

Out upon it ! I have loved  
Three whole days together !

<sup>1</sup> *The Gardener*, 14.                      <sup>2</sup> *Lover's Gift*, 14.  
14, 15, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, from *Kshanikā*.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, has nos. 8,  
<sup>4</sup> *The Gardener*, 46.

or of *Fra Lippo Lippi*, with 'a fresh face peeps across my door, and raises its eyes to my eyes'; such a piece as *Joy and Sorrow*<sup>1</sup> brings up what is easily forgotten, the poignant desolation of childhood; and *Success*<sup>2</sup> remembers what makes the 'true pathos and sublime' of these fleeting earth-days. These poems modify Ajit Chakravarti's generalization that 'everything is tossed on waves of gaiety'. Nor is the book all spring. It has pictures of his beloved Rains, as fine as any elsewhere.

He never moves far from the Ganges in these pre-Santiniketan days; and in *Advice*, under his favourite boat-simile he expresses his wish that his work may prove a ferry for ordinary human traffic, plying close to the shores of daily experience. The last stanza forebodes a fiercer destiny. These Indian rivers have seasons of storm and mighty tumult, when lightnings jag the blackness of the night and waves run high in the lashing rain:

The storm's intoxication,  
The waves' intoxication,  
Will never leave thee more!  
In love with death, alas!  
Shalt thou secure have station,  
Bound to the jettied shore?  
Thou whose fixed destiny,  
A sunken wreck to be,  
Will surely come to pass!

I conclude with brief reference to three poems. *Fruit of Karma* revives his lighter mood, with sufficient salt of earnest irony at his detractors' expense. He says he knows that in a future existence he will be drawn back to Bengal, to expiate the sin of such voluminous scribbling. Then, he pleasantly suggests, he may be an old classic. As the newest thing in critics, he will cut his own former poems to pieces, and his reincarnate critics of his poetical life will be extremely angry with the iconoclast who lays rough hands on the idols of their orthodox worship. *The Last Account* shows his ethical earnestness. 'Evening has come,

<sup>1</sup> *The Gardener*, 76.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 71.



it is time to make up my accounts. The Gods at whose doors I fell, whose feet I worshipped with my life—among them today, in this eventide I shall judge, knowing now which is and which is not, which remains and which is false.' We see a poet lingering, as he says farewell to youth. None of his many poems of farewell—and he is endlessly bidding goodbye, looking behind more wistfully than ever poet yet—is nobler. In its last pieces, *Kshanikā* marks the passing of the *jibandebatā* phase. The last poem of all, *Completion*, shows him alone with his genius, in wistful reverie.

In December 1900, he settled at Santiniketan, and started his school, with four students. From Santiniketan he issued those books of religious lyrics that made him a new fame among his countrymen and finally all over the world. Of these the first was *Naivedya*, issued in 1902. Much of it is essentially pre-Santiniketan in style, and the book may be regarded as the bridge between his 'secular' and his religious poetry. Not that any hard-and-fast demarcation is possible.

For his own genius and its development, *Naivedya—Offerings*—has a double interest; as the lyrical expression of his 'patriotic' period—for between 1900 and 1907 he was much more closely and definitely, even fiercely, identified with political agitation and struggle than ever before or since—and as first clearly sounding the note of his later religious poetry. It is a pity that the book's deep earnestness is obscured by a slight suggestion of artificiality hanging over it. The number of pieces is exactly a hundred; all except one fill just one page; all except twenty-three are written in a kind of 'scholastic', that is, in fourteen lines, though those fourteen lines are arranged with the utmost conceivable freedom and variety. All this sometimes suggests that the poet is playing with form; that graver suspicion enters also, which is to spoil so much of his later work, that his mental fibre, as man and as poet, has relaxed, and that he is more interested than he should be in the slighter beauties which lie upon the surface and which any fine poet can capture at his ease and without effort. If

there is one class of poems which, more than another, cannot afford the slightest suspicion of being literary exercises, it is religious poems; and, because a certain number have intruded that do fall under this suspicion, the effect of *Naivedya* suffers. Further, its key is too predominantly minor. Half the book would have been greater than the whole, and would have impressed the mind powerfully.

For nowhere has he written more movingly than in the best pieces of *Naivedya*. His Muse is baptized at last into service of God. Her eyes are deep with sorrows, with experience of agony and separation. She has 'kept watch o'er man's mortality'; nay, more, a sword has pierced through the poet's own heart. 'A deep distress has humanized his soul.' In his loneliness, he has found a companionship closer than he had ever dreamed that neighbourhood might come. The very first piece<sup>1</sup> is a poem of perfect dedication, as appealing as can be. Not less noble is No. 33,<sup>2</sup> with the sublimity of its closing lines:

The steps that in my play from time to time  
I caught—today I hear their tremor run  
One with the world-song, sounding in moon and sun.

In *Naivedya*, there is not the abundance of the *Chitrā* period; but neither are there the old faults. In the best pieces—and, having made my exceptions already, I am going to judge *Naivedya* by its best pieces—his qualities shine in purity and simplicity. His interest in the most trivial things can give us such a generalization as 'Thy centuries follow each other, perfecting a small wild flower'. He has found that poise and calm of spirit which are perhaps his chief gift to the world, judged as teacher rather than as poet. *Naivedya* has power to heal and help, from its richness of personal experience.

Ajit Chakravarti dates his 'patriotic' period from *Naivedya*. While the first fifty or so of *Naivedya's* poems are religious, the rest are mostly patriotic. These patriotic 'sonnets' might be compared with Wordsworth's. The

<sup>1</sup> (English) *Gitanjali*, 76.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 43.



circumstances of their India and England differ widely ; but both poets lament the passing of a nobler age than their own, and the decay of manners and life. Rabindranath's attitude is marked off sharply from the popular patriotism of the time. He criticizes some old-established customs very sharply. He repudiates not only the unrestrained ecstasies of religion—with Wordsworth holding that

the Gods approve  
The depth, and not the tumult of the soul,  
A fervent, not ungovernable love ;

and approve also, he adds emphatically, a love which is tested and accompanied by the severest reason and strictest ethical conduct—but in one group of poems he makes a scornful attack on idolatry.

Those who break Thee up, and divide Thee, roll on the earth with satiate, sleepy heart. Today the whole world despises them, and has its foot on their heads. Those who have frittered their manhood away, and have made of Thy worship a plaything, in abandonment to the intoxication of their emotions—today, these old babies are the whole world's dolls. The dwarfish crowd who would have made Thee their equal insult Thee—and who will show *them* respect ? Those whose insolence would endow Thee with life by their *mantras*<sup>1</sup>—who will endow *them* with life ? Who will give unity to those who divide Thee ?<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere he says ' Long have they played with Thee as though Thou wert a doll '.<sup>3</sup> This patriot was a strangely aloof figure, even when apparently in the forefront of mobs whom he seemed to be leading. Did ever leader flash such scorn and anger at his following ? India, he cries repeatedly, has earned the world's contempt, by her contempt of God.

Yet he sees the tragic errors of other lands no less. No. 64<sup>4</sup> is the famous and almost prophetic poem which begins ' The sun of the century is setting today in clouds of blood—at the festival of hate today, in clashing weapons sounds the maddened, dreadful chant of death '. The piece ends

<sup>1</sup> Incantations. A reference to the ceremony by which an idol is given life.

<sup>2</sup> No. 50.

<sup>3</sup> No. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Translated in *Nationalism*.

with a couplet that contains an oblique criticism of his English contemporaries :

Awakening fear, the poet-mobs howl round,  
A chant of quarrelling curs on the burning-ground.

And certainly, if one remembers how some of them celebrated the close of the century, there can be no doubt which poet helped humanity most, and the Indian had a right to feel that English poets were serving a lower patriotism.

That there were Western ideals of conduct and character which this patriot envied for his own countrymen is very clearly shown in No. 72.<sup>1</sup> I quote his own translation, omitting one clause which has no place in the Bengali :

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free ;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by  
narrow domestic walls ;  
Where words come out from the depth of truth ;  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the  
dreary desert sand of dead habit ;  
Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening  
thought and action ;  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

This rendering does not convey the force of the original, with its passionate concluding prayer :

Strike, Father ! Merciless, strike with Thine own hand !  
Into that Heaven wake this Indian land !

He refuses to despair, even though India has forgotten the message of her ancient sages, the voice which cried :

Hear, all ye peoples of the world ! and hear  
All ye Immortal Gods, that have your sphere  
In the City of Light ! Him have I known, have found,  
That One, the Shining Lord, beyond the bound  
Of darkness throned ! Know Him ! To Him thine eyes  
Uplift ! So shalt thou o'erpass Death ! There lies  
No other path !

Ah, India, dead !

There is but one, no other way to tread !<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> (English) *Gitanjali*, 35.

<sup>2</sup> *Naivedya*, 60.



Rabindranath's love of his country shows in the texture of his familiar thought. His images are all of Bengal's daily life: the Ganges—and remember what this means to India, though a river means little to us in England—this stream is Bengal's soul, Bengal's body, the nerves and the veins thereof; the temples; the household lamps. He applies natural processes to his soul. His country's crowds he compares to a river, her streets to arteries. Then, he sees her birds migrating overhead, and

Suddenly on the river of my mind  
The lotus-forests die in the chill wind,  
In files and companies the wild geese flight  
To the far south, where feather-grass flowers white  
And towering-tall, upon the sandbanks lone.  
Again, in Spring, they come; aloft, high-flown,  
They float, chanting with joy—<sup>1</sup>

a picture that might have come out of Virgil. Another piece<sup>2</sup> is the very concentration of natural loveliness—Indian, with the freshness of Vedic dawns and the calm of the *Vedānta's* forest-meditations in perfect synthesis. The all-hailed goddess-maiden of Aryan daysprings has attained a beauty beyond her own, as she bears her golden basket and 'the wreath of beauty, silently to crown the earth'.

The reader will have felt how austere and unselfish is the patriotism expressed in *Naivedya*, sterner yet more loving than his earlier moods. He is neither captivated by the poms of a legendary past nor stung into querulous scolding of a disappointing present. These patriotic pieces are so nobly felt and uttered that there is no sharp severance between them and the religious poems of *Naivedya*. Indeed, his experience of God is expressed, no less than his patriotic love, by means of images drawn from the landscape of his country; and in many of the poems the patriotic and religious mingle. In No. 86,<sup>3</sup> he prays for rain to end his drought; and we have a picture of the

<sup>1</sup> *Naivedya*, 25.

<sup>2</sup> 81; (English) *Gitanjali*, 67.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 40.

far-spreading clearness. No. 87 gives a further picture of the dried-up woods awaiting rain :

A mendicant, this forest of my mind,  
Long while its arms has raised, crisp shrunken pined,  
Gazing aloft to the angry heights !

He prays his Lord to break up this harsh noon, sending his herald wind to whirl afar the dead leaves, and to gladden the woods with rumour of the rain-storm's coming. In other poems we have his love of open clean spaces, of free air, his ecstasy in vastness. He uses that oldest of images of man's soul and God, of the river travelling to the Sea. He shows us the common joy, the happiness that wakes at every man's door ; shows it as a lotus floating in the infinite sky, blooming everywhere. In these simplest images, sublimity is enhanced by the simplicity. Thus *Naivedya* achieves its chief quality, its atmosphere. This atmosphere is that of the life we live, every day and all our days ; common yet filled with God, in Whom we live and move and have our being. It is by the path of this daily life that the Invisible has touched him ; he knows no other way :

In Thine own time, in a moment leaps to light  
The Impossible, from somewhere out of sight !  
In its own radiance hid, yet robed alone  
In the ever-possible and ever-known !<sup>1</sup>

The expected happens ; and brings with it God, the unexpected. Yet he prays that he may not be so captivated by world's beauty as to lose sight of World's Creator. In severer strains still, he prays for courage and manliness, for independence, for purity of spirit. Such are the poems translated as Nos. 36<sup>2</sup> and 39<sup>3</sup> in the English *Gitanjali*. These are more prosaic than their fellows ; but their stern note<sup>4</sup> has been heard far too little in Indian, as in

<sup>1</sup> *Naivedya*, 62.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 99.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 5 and 6 ; and *Gitanjali*,

59. The translation is a synthesis of all three poems.

<sup>4</sup> And cf.

(English) *Gitanjali* 35 ; already quoted.



other religion, and they strengthen the book as a whole. The original is sterner than the translation.

This sternness of *Naivedya* is drawn from an experience that has gone further afield than formerly. When asked about Christian influence in the English *Gitanjali*, he is said to have told an American audience that he had 'never read the Bible'. Yet he certainly dipped into the New Testament, and there are places in *Naivedya* where I think that there has fallen upon characteristically Indian thought the memory of some parable or words of Jesus. In No. 53, there seems as if there might be a knowledge of those words of the Son of Man, 'I will tell thee whom to fear', with their stark message that there is nothing to fear in the Three Worlds, but the Three Worlds' Master :

Thou art the refuge of all, is this word vain ? O King, fear is faithlessness towards Thee. Fear of men ? Shepherd of men, why fear of men ? With what man have I to do every day and all days ?

O King of Kings, what king shall I fear ? That man in whose heart Thou dwellest finds even in a prison Thy bosom, that fills the Three Worlds. He is free, though in jail. Can fear of death touch him, O Deathless One ! Should this life of a day be lost, wilt Thou not fulfil the gift, in its poverty of life, from Thy store ! Shall I clutch and cling, in such unbelief, to life ? Where are the folk, where the king, where anyone whom I should fear ? Thou art for ever, and I am for ever Thine !

Or, in the previous poem, I fancy a recollection of *The Parable of the Ten Virgins* :

On the heath, in the hard way, these who have fallen at the inn's threshold, drugged with emotion, senselessly drunken with passionateness—these who did not keep themselves ever ready and wakeful—stunned and stupefied, they knew not when the pilgrim-host of the universe went on to the distant hill, sounding the conch of victory !

He is glancing at the excesses of *bhakti*, or ecstatic worship of God. In *Naivedya*, he says some stern things of this, which may surprise when we remember his early enthusiasm for the *Vaishnava* singers. As a poet, he might be supposed to be antinomian in sympathy ; but he never compromised on ethics.

## SANTINIKETAN

SANTINIKETAN is two miles out of Bolpur. Round it is a typical upland plain, dry and treeless, cracked with nullahs and rough with low thorns. An occasional leopard comes here, and there is generally a pair of wolves about. On the horizon are *sāl*-woods and towards the west a stately line of palms. The place is in close touch with the pastoral life of Bengal, and in the rains its bareness flushes into the green of paddy-fields. Had the poet's *jibandebatā* chosen for him, a better place for his genius could not have been found. I have written in an earlier chapter of the two Bengals. The riverside Bengal he knew intimately, and its gentle loveliness had filled his verse. But this is the other Bengal, the haunt of Rudra, the Terrible One, the home of blazing winds, the Bengal of *sāl*-wood and thorn-brake. From now there is a change in his nature-poetry, visible first in *Naivedya*.

I cannot better put the reader where he can understand this new atmosphere and environment, than by quoting from the *Diary*<sup>1</sup> of Satischandra Roy, a young poet who joined Rabindranath when the school was started, dying after one year of service :

These broad open spaces round Bolpur help one to understand the burning fierceness of the sun, and reveal in the storms the power of the wind. The clouds and rain remind one of Indra himself, while the moon and stars with their light decorate the darkness with a language that speaks of Aswinikumar.<sup>2</sup> To live in such a tranquil place deepens day by day the peace of one's heart. . . .

When I go out into the fierce heat which fills the surrounding plains, I feel as Saturn must have felt when the rings of fire were placed round his head. It seems as if in a less intense light I could not have seen the images of the sky, bright and burning like molten

<sup>1</sup> Translated, W. W. Pearson (*Modern Review*, October 1922).

<sup>2</sup> The Castor and Pollux of Hindu mythology.



gold, or of the lonely plain, with its distant red road gleaming across its widespread fields. Grey, like the bed of a dried-up river, the slightest unevenness can be seen distinctly—so far away, and yet every smallest inequality standing upright as though to compel attention and as if saying, 'Today you *must* see me!' . . . Here, at Bolpur, the wind comes across a vast plain panting and seizing in its embrace like a drunkard the tall *sāl*-trees.

The history of Santiniketan begins with the Maharshi. In his time, its nakedness was broken by nothing but brushwood and two fine *chbātim*-trees, under which he used to meditate. They still flourish, now the centre of groves, and in autumn are fragrant with the white flowers of the *mālati*-creeper; a tablet records the Maharshi's connexion with them. There used to be other scattered tablets in the earth around them, inscribed with austere texts of theism—even the very stones made to cry out—but these the poet removed, as out of keeping. Inscriptions at the gate still forbid the taking of life here, the bringing of flesh or any idol within the *āshram*,<sup>1</sup> the speaking slightly of any worship or deity, and the indulgence in any unclean mirth. The place has been made very beautiful in its wild disordered way, by groves of *sephāli* and mango and by a famous *sāl*-avenue. *Sephāli* flings down its flowers at night; when I last stayed at the *āshram*, I remember what an added beauty was given to the autumn dawn as I watched young girls, the daughters of teachers at Santiniketan, gathering these fragrant flowers for garlands.

I have written at large about the school elsewhere, in several places—and its educational work does not come within my present scope. But it cannot be quite passed over. It should be noted first, that the poet planned much more than a school. He sought a home for the spirit of India, distracted and torn in the conflicting storms of the age. The unity of India has been a dream present with some of her greater sons. Here he felt it might begin to be realized with a completeness hitherto unattained.

I seemed choked for breath in the hideous nightmare of our present time, meaningless in its petty ambitions of poverty, and felt in me

<sup>1</sup> Retreat.

the struggle of my motherland for awakening in spiritual emancipation. Our endeavours after political emancipation seemed to me unreal to the core, and pitifully feeble in their utter helplessness. I felt that it is a blessing of providence that begging should be an unprofitable profession, and that only to him that hath shall be given. I said to myself that we must seek for our own inheritance, and with it buy our true place in the world.<sup>1</sup>

These last words lead us right into the *āshram's* aim. They represent his consistent attitude; as long ago as 1893, he wrote to a Bengali friend, 'Till we can justify ourselves we should hide ourselves'. But it was not simply a home for the spirit of India that he sought, but one for the spirit of all nations, for his mind was so universal in its sympathies that it could never rest content with a part. This explains his vigorous stand against non-co-operation, which was so resented by many of his countrymen, including some 'of his own household'—it is notorious that many of his friends and colleagues at Santiniketan were in enthusiastic sympathy with non-co-operation.

To Tagore, the great gift of ancient India was her meditative calm, which he wished to recapture. Modern education in Bengal was machine-made and spurious, mere memorization in a foreign tongue. At Santiniketan, except in the rains, classes are held out-of-doors. A boy may sit in the branches of a tree, if he wishes. The poet's own dramas are played at term-ends and on other occasions. Religion is made the background of everything; the glass *mandir*,<sup>2</sup> open to the air on all sides, is the school chapel. Here worship was conducted twice a week, by the poet when present, by teachers in his absence. In the morning and evening a period is set apart for meditation. You cannot compel a boy to meditate, of course: but you can insist that he remains quiet, and does not disturb others.

The school does not observe Hindu festivals, but there are two long vacations, and half-holidays for the birthdays of Christ, Buddha, Mahomet, Chaitanya, Rammohan Roy, the Maharshi, 'and other great men'. 'Shakespeare?' I once asked Ajit Chakravarti. He smiled back as he shook

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to W. W. Pearson's *Shantiniketan*.

<sup>2</sup> 'Temple.'



his head. They do not take the Swan of Avon seriously as a religious teacher.

The poet wished to use the experience of the West also, in building his school. The open air, the religious emphasis, the close friendship between teacher and pupil—these things were traditional in ancient Indian education. But he wanted to build up independence and strength and self-reliance. The methods of the George Junior Republic in the United States proved valuable to him, among other systems examined. So Santiniketan is a self-governing republic. The boys have everything that is not luxury—their own dairy farm, their own post office, hospital, church, workshops. When I was last there, in 1922, their small printing-press was making way for a more elaborate arrangement by which Santiniketan hoped to issue its own books. Buildings were going up which would be used for industrial training; and there were looms for weaving. The library is a better one in pure literature than any to which the citizens of Calcutta have access. It has been enriched by very generous gifts from Europe and America, and in it the poet put the numerous autographed books which he received from authors of more or less fame. From Santiniketan, the boys go out to the villages, to run night-schools for the labouring classes and the lower castes. In this way, caste exclusiveness is broken down in early years, and the boys learn to work for their land. In Santiniketan they hold their own courts, and inflict their own penalties. There is no corporal punishment. Games are played vigorously and with unusual success.

But personal influence has counted for more than anything else. The poet was the school's pervading presence. In later years, he was absent for long periods, and when there was occupied by many tasks, till his actual teaching at times was not much more than the labours of Andrew Marvell's fays and elves:

Where fauns and fairies do the meadows till,  
More by their presence than their skill.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Mower, Against Gardens.*

But he had efficient assistants. I have mentioned Ajit Chakravarti, whose death was such a loss to Bengal's intellectual life. Then the school had its art department, presided over by Nandalal Basu, Asit Haldar, and other well-known painters. It also had C. F. Andrews's quixotic and unselfish personality, during long periods when his was the guiding hand, as well as when the poet was there. There was 'Willie' Pearson,<sup>1</sup> loved by all who knew him. After the First World War, Leonard Elmhirst and his wife came, as did scholars from many parts of Europe and India; Sylvain Lévi came earlier. Then there were the poet's own family and relations, some of whom gave generously of ability and labour. No school in the world can be richer in personal influences, varied and striking. The poet himself gave his life, so that he has left it haunted. Here he had

A body for his needs, that so  
He may not all unclothéd go ;  
A vital instrument whereby  
He still may commune with the sky,  
When death has loosed the plaited strands.<sup>2</sup>

But our chief concern is with the work Santiniketan did for the poet. It gave him a home where he found peace as nowhere else. It was a place of extraordinary friendliness. All was leisure, everyone was kind ; the poet himself was accessible at almost any hour. Dawn or a moonlit night would show his figure roaming the groves ; he seemed to take little sleep. Poetry came naturally to him here, where sweet-scented flowering shrubs and creepers shut him in with so many friends and admirers. Almost every evening there was music, and 'Dinu',<sup>3</sup> 'the treasury of my songs', played and sang. During most of the year, he was surrounded by young life, and during the long holidays the place was never empty, for his friends came and visitors from all over the world. A little distance away lived his venerated

<sup>1</sup> To the regret of all India, he died in 1923.

<sup>2</sup> T. E. Brown, *Epistola ad Dakyni*.

<sup>3</sup> When the poet had composed a new tune, he sent for his nephew Dinendranath, to whom he sang it. The tune was then safe, and the poet at liberty to forget it if he wished.



eldest brother, Dwijendranath,<sup>1</sup> in extreme old age, but always ready to talk with a friend, as he sat under the snowy-blossomed bushes which swept round his bungalow. The poet's son lived only a little farther away, with his wife.

The place will be ranked by those who follow us with other sacred groves and academes. It is packed already with memories. It is well that Rabindranath found such a shelter, for the next few years were full of sorrow. His wife died in December 1902, and his second daughter in 1904. In the latter year he left Santiniketan for Almora in the Himalayas, where he stayed for some time, vainly trying to save his child. All his attention was required for her, and for his youngest son, who was a baby. His elder son died at Monghyr in 1907. These were years of acute loneliness and it is amazing that he should have borne the burden of so much public work as he did, from time to time. Only a supreme sense of national need could have steeled him to put aside the crying sorrow of his own heart.

The poetry of this time of protracted suffering and anxiety is very sad. It is contained in four books. The first, *Smaran—Remembrance*—is a sequence of twenty-seven poems commemorating his wife. All but nine are 'sonnets', the poet having long since recognized the unique value of this form for occasional verse. A few of these suffer from a fancifulness which wrongs their theme; and the series has no great unity of thought. Sonnet-sequences are rarely successes. Yet *Smaran* ranks with all but the very best of the world's elegiac verse.

The poems fall into two groups. The great majority see his beloved's form 'eternally vanishing', as Keats saw that of Fanny Brawne. She has gone out into the infinite universe, is one with stars and the vastness of space, the beauty of flowers and clouds and storms. Not very satisfying comfort to man's ordinary moods; yet it invests the poet's sombre thought with a majestic solemnity. She whom he adored has gone into homeless space, his house is empty. So he seeks her in the universal; as his proud

<sup>1</sup> He died, 1926. He was eminent as poet, thinker, social reformer, and was a saintly and delightful man.

swelling grief insists, she has left ajar a door in his life that no power can shut. There is an impressive feeling of emancipation. His 'Household Lakshmi' has become his 'Cosmic Lakshmi'. 'Love came', he says in No. 3 :

Love came, and went, leaving an open door ;  
 And will not come again.  
 One other guest I look for, one—no more—  
 The last that doth remain.  
 That guest will come, will douse my lamp one day,  
 And in his chariot take ;  
 Far from my home whirl on his houseless way,  
 In stars' and planets' wake.

His beloved by her going has left him her command to finish his work :

Picking out and flinging away Life's thorns, weave your garland.  
 Then to your new house, O homeless One, bring your full garland.

He is not all unhappy. There has been return, as well as going. 'Through the lion-gate of Death', his beloved has re-entered his life triumphantly. Now,

My mind's lake at your feet today creates you  
 In the reflection of the universe.

Leisure has come to him at last. Of old he was busy, occupied with toys like fame and his duties. Spring knocked unheeded ; but today, as one of the loveliest sonnets tells,<sup>1</sup> the mad days are welcome, and all his heart's doors lie open to them. In another poem, a fine stormy lyric, he uses his familiar image of a boat that is to be unmoored, for a flood-tide has reached it. Other poems tell that he has found how vain are effort and fame without love and companionship. But he forgets the past. True union lies ahead.

There are other poems which do not attempt to disguise their sense of desolation ; such is the first.<sup>2</sup> The second<sup>3</sup> is one of several that voice the thought that all his wife's selfless service is finished. While with him, she was hidden in her work, and he did not know her as now he does. It is

<sup>1</sup> A précis appears in *Lover's Gift*, 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Fruit-Gathering*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 46.



too late to ask forgiveness ; he can only leave her with God, her God and his, while he goes forward to the true union to be. Her service is ended, but his remains, and will be with him till his days finish.

In some of these pieces, we find a longing after personal immortality and union, expressed with strength and pathos. No. 14<sup>1</sup> uses what is one of the two or three effective arguments for the necessity of another life. The poem is of ineffable tenderness. Not less moving is No. 18.<sup>2</sup> No. 15 presents another profound appeal and argument. Who but these two can finish the work these two began ? If the Universe has purpose, then this yoke-fellowship is still needed, or even here its purpose will have failed.

So we see him, lonelier than ever in his sorrowful greatness, with eyes peering forward into that vastness into which one form has vanished for evermore. He sees the red lac of her feet in the evening glow, he feels her caress in the winds and the soft breath of the flowers. He is exultant as he thinks of that home now his in anticipation, among the peace of the eternal stars. Yet at times he is desolate with the utterness of his loss, as other men are with theirs.

Between 1901 and 1907 he wrote most of his novels. The first two, *Eyesore* and *The Wreck*, are incredibly bad. A charming style and fine description are not enough in a novel ; and the stories are botched. *Gora* came at the end of this period of novel-writing. It is a book which has greatly influenced Bengali novelists, and by some it is held to be the best of Bengali novels. All these novels appeared first serially.

In 1903 appeared a second collected edition of his poetry, edited by Babu Mohitchandra Sen, a teacher at Santiniketan. Mohit Babu rearranged the pieces according to matter and manner. Poems of widely different periods are grouped together, as they are in his English translations. Out of this edition arose a new volume of lyrics, *Utsarga* or *Dedications*. This consists of forty-nine pieces, most of which were first prefixed to different volumes of this new edition, as

<sup>1</sup> *Fruit-Gathering*, 47.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 48.

introductory poems. For this reason, it is a difficult book to criticize. It has no unity, no connecting thread of thought or emotion. All that the poet was ever induced to say is that 'it has a lot of the *jibandebatā* about it'.

*Utsarga* is really just a very varied and miscellaneous handful of lyrical poems, all well written and some of them of much beauty. Nos. 24 to 29 are 'sonnets' on the Himalayas; interesting for their own strength and imaginative beauty, for the comparative rareness of their theme in this poet, and for their splendid use of modern science. He contrasts the volcanic youth of these giants with their calm peace. Now in their passivity the eternal sage Siva is meditating, and in their steadfastness the eternal union of Siva and his bride is symbolized. The next poem, 30, carries on this interest in science. It is the best known of his addresses to Sir Jagadischandra Basu, praising him as the true descendant of the rishis of old, as the man who, while his countrymen were croaking like frogs boasting in a well and were imitating alien modes of dress and speech, was studying Nature and learning her secret.

No. 42 shows the return of another old theme, the lover going to the tryst through storm. In the opening it is Krishna who comes, the outward loveliness of the world wooing the poet in his mighty youth:

Was it thou that came that day—  
 Came to my court of youth?  
     The flute was at thy finger-tips,  
     And silent laughter on thy lips,  
     That day of *Phālgun* mad with beauty's wine.  
 Ah, was it thou in truth  
     Came to my side that day?  
     Came in thy bright array  
     To the new-held court of youth?

But now the scene is changed. Through the storm is coming—neither Krishna, nor Radha in her blue robes and wet dishevelled hair, but the Terrible God, the One who has won his heart. And the soul exults, knowing what 'tremendous lover' draws near.

As *Utsarga*, though a beautiful book, is in character like a



selection from his other later books of lyrics, I do not propose to give it further examination. Its chief interest is that it is a porch by which we enter his later lyrical work. The necessity of producing these dedication-poems rediscovered for him his gift of song, as light as ever but new in manner, the manner of *Gitānjali* and *Gitāli*.

*Sisu*—*The Child*—belongs to his desolate stay in Almora. One child, as I have said, was dying of consumption; another, a boy, was to die not long after. 'He was a very sweet boy, he who died at Monghyr.' The father's loneliness, with the recent memory of his wife's death, and the other shadows darkening his way, found solace in these poems.

I had this sick child with me. She was on her death-bed. I do not know why I wrote<sup>1</sup> about children. I used to send the poems to Mohit Babu, who was at Bolpur, and was classifying and publishing my poems in parts. I wanted to include these, so I sent them as I wrote them. I used to become the child-poet, going back to my childhood—just as I do now—

I am quoting a conversation of the autumn of 1921—when I am tired, and things are not going well with me. Then I try—with that laugh at himself that his friends know—  
to get rid of my age, and my experience, and my wisdom, and to go back to my childhood.

*Sisu*, when the poems came, was not a new phase in his work. This is indicated by the older pieces that he bound up with it—such as *The Seven Chāmpā Brothers*, *The Rain Falls Pit-a-pat*, *the River Swells*, and *The River* itself. The new pieces are accessible to the foreign reader in *The Crescent Moon*, from which a fairly adequate notion of *Sisu* can be gained.

The only thing wrong with *Sisu* is that there is a little too much of it, including a few pieces that are spoilt by being forced and too weakly sentimental. *Why Sweet*<sup>2</sup> is one of these, with the tenderness not as effective as a greater strength could have made it. *Baby's Kingdom*<sup>3</sup> is too

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> *Crescent Moon*, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17.

self-conscious, and too solemn over the trivial. It is not a revelation from within, but the view-point of a man who has resolved to be amused and touched; or so it seems to me.

But the poems fill their place, adding a new note to his work. They abound in delicate glimpses of scenery; 'the moonlight floating on the jungle of white feather-grass'; the wild birds haunting the reeds or playing on their muddy margin; the wide heaths of a child's imagination, haunted yet created from the actual world. Such pieces as the dedication poem<sup>1</sup> and *Farewell*<sup>2</sup> carry us beyond the child's mind, into a deeper and more mystic world than any that he can inhabit knowingly. *Baby*<sup>3</sup> is suffused with his subtle knowledge of mother no less than of child. No less beautiful, in the same fanciful fashion, is *The Sleep-Stealer*.<sup>4</sup> *Playfulness*<sup>5</sup> is tenderness itself. *Astronomy*<sup>6</sup> and *The Scientist*<sup>7</sup> are compact of charm, the latter especially. *The Critic*<sup>8</sup> laughs at his own futility, and gives a child's point of view. *The Hero*<sup>9</sup> is spirited and true.

The book contains two of his best gifts, his command of fairy lore and his knowledge of the child and of child-psychology. Of the first quality, we get some fine examples. See the lovely finish of *Play*,<sup>10</sup> where the 'old lady of dreams' comes flying to the child in bed. 'She who plays her music to the stars'—not 'he', as the poet, most unwarrantably jerking 'mysticism' into the English version of a beautiful passage, has rendered it—'is standing at your window with her flute.' As for the second quality, it is everywhere. He has a deep love of childhood. It is not strange that *The Crescent Moon* was felt to be a revelation of a child's mind, comparable to the best that any language had seen.

*Kheyā—Crossing*<sup>11</sup> is less easy to accept whole-heartedly, though the execution is everywhere perfect. It is one long wail. 'I suppose my mind was occupied with the idea of death and crossing. That may have been why I chose the

<sup>1</sup> (English) *Gitanjali*, 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Crescent Moon*, p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Kheyā* means a 'ferry'.



name *Kheyā*.<sup>1</sup> The atmosphere is dreamy, sometimes with a filmy beauty far surpassing anything in *Evening Songs*, but too often in a manner vaguely exasperating to a robust reader. Further, it must be admitted to be one of his 'streakiest' books, with an unusual proportion of pieces that are just literary exercises. It loses by its monotony, its minor key, and its frequent triviality. He plays too much, and, though the playing is dexterous, there is something heavy in the solemn insistence on the tiny. His flute becomes a vexing toy, and his vague figures, ferrymen or folk waiting for the ferry, tiresome ghosts. His mind was clearly very tired, as well as depressed.

A few pieces are descriptive or fanciful, without symbolism, as *A Rainy Dawn* :

At the World-Master's door,  
Seeking an alms,  
Some suppliant stood this dawn,  
With outspread palms.  
His hands the crowding gold  
Clutching could nowise hold.  
Wide over earth it rolled—  
Ah, see it !

In groves of Paradise,  
Amid the bowers  
Of *parijāt* the bees  
Rifled the flowers.  
Lo, with its honeyed weight  
Their hive has burst ! Its freight  
In sweet, gold-showering spate  
Is streaming !

The rumour rose this dawn—  
Lakshmi her throne  
In the red light will take,  
Sitting alone.  
Bursting all bounds of space,  
Light flowered with lotus-face ;  
As to a fair 'gan race  
All creatures !

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

Or in the Heavenly City  
 Stands Indra's Queen,  
 Out from a casement looking,  
 Raising its screen ?  
 In silent ecstasy  
 Smiling she stands on high,  
 Her robes in the azure sky  
 A-flutter ! . . .

In *Baisākḥ*, one of a handful of fine nature-pieces, the old volcano is not quite extinct, but the explosions are slight :

At the wild bees' humming sound  
 Wandering round and round,  
 There wakes in my breast again  
 The dance of someone's feet,  
 Wakes in each rhythmic vein  
 Her clashing ankleted beat.

The poem opens with the atmosphere of a hot tense late spring day, and closes with a listless picture.

*Nest and Sky* makes a justified boast that he has expressed the varied life of the earth, and proclaims his joy in the severer task that now awaits him :

Sitting in my nest, I sang  
 The varying chant of light and shadow ;  
 I mingled with that song  
 The restless life of the woods :  
 The heavy weariness of noon,  
 The deep peace of the night-tide,  
 The victorious journeying forth of dawn,  
 The sad silence of evening ;  
 Trembling of leaves, and bursting open of flowers,  
 The downpour of rain on nights of *Śrāvan*,  
 The chirping of insects  
 At play in their holes.

Am I to sing today  
 The lonely song of the blue sky ?  
 Must I let my freed soul wander,  
 Forgetful of the ties of the nest ?



He still falls back thankfully on the known and familiar :

Yet still I return to the nest,  
In the same way, with weeping and laughter ;  
Still I love  
This varying chant of light and shadow.

Lastly, *Kheyā* contains a series of lyrics, *The Coming* and *The Shape of Sorrow* among them, which are the first drafts of the idea which presently took shape as *Rājā—The King of the Dark Chamber*. These are among his profoundest religious lyrics. The heavy shadow of his recent experience is over them.

*BOOK IV*

1905—1919

THE *GITĀNJALI* PERIOD





## GROWING SYMBOLISM—NEW DRAMAS

*Khayā*, though published in 1905, was written earlier. In its title Ajit Chakravarti found an indication that the poet knew there was to be a passing over, a ferrying from one bank of the stream of activity to the other, from the practical to the meditative. That is true to this extent, that he was ceasing to be deeply stirred by the ordinary course of current politics, and was withdrawing into himself. Yet events compelled him to a fiercer blaze of activity than any yet. In 1905 came the Partition of Bengal, which was defended as a necessary administrative measure, dividing a province that was unwieldy, but was taken by Bengalis to be an attempt to kill their new national consciousness, by cutting their land in two. A boycott of foreign goods was established; political assassinations and dacoities soon followed, the perpetrators generally being students or, at any rate, very young men. Rabindranath dissociated himself from these aspects of the excitement; and in *The Home and the World* made clear his condemnation of the intolerance that was rampant on the patriot side.

Today, we can only imagine the effect on this eager enthusiastic people, when their famous poet appeared on their platforms, and with his eyes flashing poured out lava-floods of wrath and appeal. There was no man in Bengal whose name was so sure to draw an audience; even those who disliked his work and were exasperated by his ways were attracted by him. His oratorical triumphs were only less numerous than his poetical. 'No one who heard it', says Mr Mahalanobis, 'can ever forget his magnificent address in 1918, on *Working as Our Master Wishes*. He held fifteen hundred people spell-bound for nearly two hours.'



He took the lead in many of the characteristic developments of the *swadeshi* movement; and his songs set the students astir. The Congress he avoided, attending only once, the first time it was held in Calcutta, when he sang *Bande Mātārām* to his own tune. He used to assert that this strained and ruined his voice, and this was one of the last times he sang in public, except when acting in his own plays. In 1905 he joined the newly-formed National Council of Education, for whom he delivered a course of lectures, issued two years later as *Sāhitya—Literature*. Of the three volumes, the first was on æsthetics in general; the others on Sanskrit literature, and on Bengali literature, with studies of Joubert and Tennyson's *De Profundis*. He helped to found national schools and colleges. He spread the use of weaving-looms and lost a good deal of money over them, an unfortunate experience which may have helped to make him sceptical of Mr Gandhi's gospel of the *charkā*,<sup>1</sup> sixteen years later. He was busy also in organizing co-operative societies. All the while, he was speaking and writing with a passionate enthusiasm that even at this distance of time communicates its glow from the printed page.

I understand it has been denied that he was on the Government list of 'suspects'. I have not seen the denial; he was certainly watched. The poet told me how one day a friend of his went to the Jorasanko police station to give notice of a theft. While he was there, a constable came in, and reported that 'Rabindranath Tagore C class number 12' had come to Calcutta from Bolpur. After Lord Curzon's Durbar, he received an official letter rebuking him for 'seditious sentences' in his attack on that famous function. 'It picked out quite the mildest', said the poet gleefully.

The poet's political activities ceased suddenly. The national movement had been criticized by him from the first, for keeping social reform in the background. This charge was true, before Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru became its leaders. Even then, the former's urgency that

<sup>1</sup> Spinning-wheel.

the stigma of untouchability should be removed, passed ignored, while bonfires of foreign cloth drew mobs of excited spectators and participators. It will have been seen how strongly social were the poet's nationalist activities. The Partition apart, he did not touch purely political propaganda very much, except when his sarcasm attacked the Delhi Durbar. He grew weary and disillusioned; and in one day he resigned his membership of all public committees and bodies and retired to Santiniketan. His withdrawal raised a storm of anger, 'traitor' and 'coward' being the kindest epithets hurled after him. But he kept out of public life for some years. This retirement took place in 1907.

Ajit Chakravarti's summary<sup>1</sup> of what happened, both when Rabindranath plunged into the *swadeshi* excitement and when he abruptly left it, may be inserted here, as the opinion of a friend who was very close to all the poet's actions:

For four years since its foundation, the *āshram* went on humming the old forgotten strain that came from the past, from the woodlands of Aryan India of four thousand years ago. Then there burst into the country a thunder-storm. The great national movement with its trumpet-blast of *Bande Mātārām*, its flaunting hopes and high aspirations, its riotous excitement and frantic expectancy, came. The poet became its high priest. The *āshram* was no longer a shadow of the benighted past, it was a reality of the dawning day. The country consciousness surged high in the *āshram*. Of course, the western features of the school, e.g. self-government of the boys and the atmosphere of freedom, did not suffer at this period. But the emphasis was certainly laid on the spirit of ancient India. Not simply on the spiritual side of ancient India, but on the side of social life and rules as well, which were, without question, narrow and convention-bound.

Fortunately, the narrow and aggressive lines on which the whole movement was worked out, making patriotism an end unto itself and efficiency the goal of all activities, grew discordant to the poet's growing spiritual life. He suddenly cut himself away from the movement. He sought solitude of spirit, he sought the universal joy of nature, he sought the hidden springs of spiritual life. It was then that many of his longer *Gītānjali* poems were written.

<sup>1</sup> *Modern Review*, July 1917.



His seclusion was broken by one episode only, a characteristically volcanic eruption upon the outer world, when he appeared suddenly in Calcutta, and made a very determined attempt to reunite the Brahmo sects, and to drive out the remnants of caste prejudice and practice in the parent body, the Adi Samaj. Nearly fifty years before, Keshabchandra Sen had demanded, against the Maharshi's party, that the *vedi*<sup>1</sup> be open to members of all castes, and the demand had disrupted the Samaj. Now the Maharshi's son renewed Keshab's attack. A Santiniketan teacher was made manager of the Adi Samaj; a room was rented in Cornwallis Street, Calcutta, and a movement started among students. Once again a non-Brahman occupied the Adi Samaj *vedi*. But the conservatives won, after a bitter fight, and the poet returned to Bolpur.

In retirement he entered upon another great creative period; and in 1908 he began to issue a collected edition of his prose. Between 1909 and 1916 he published a series of seventeen very small volumes, *Sāntiniketan*, religious addresses delivered in his school chapel. His *Jibansmriti—My Reminiscences*—appeared in 1912 and was given a fine welcome. Many splendid songs were written, into which the fragrance of Santiniketan mango groves and the benign peace of moonlit nights of wandering had passed. Now his latest dramatic phase began, that of the dramas which I feel entitled to call symbolical—for that is what they are, and they are responsible, even more than *Gitanjali*, for the one-sided opinion of his genius that prevails in the outer world. The poet's creations were so real to him that he demurred to any labels. But labels serve a purpose, if we do not allow ourselves to forget they are labels only, identification-marks and not full descriptions. *Autumn-Festival* came out in 1908, *Atonement* in 1909, *Rājā* in 1910, *The Post-Office* in 1912.

*Autumn-Festival* is the first of a group of plays all in prose, with songs interspersed. Its stage is as simple as *Chitrāngadā*'s, being just the open air, where wind and

<sup>1</sup> Preaching-seat.

sunlight are almost actors, and are certainly the pervading life. It was written for his younger boys at Bolpur. 'The spirit of festival dominates the whole . . . it is one of his most successful plays—it never fails to "go" at Bolpur.' *Autumn-Festival*, like *Phālguni* later, is almost a mask, in the sense of the word as Milton left it. There is no dancing, though the wild gusty bands of revellers who from now on are a constant feature of his plays, sweeping in, nature-intoxicated, with songs whose theme is their utter irresponsibility, dance in everything but name. Say, then, if you like, that there is no dancing, which makes a slight difference from the class of *Comus*; but there is an abundance of pastoral accompaniment, of happy atmosphere, of freshness of phrase and feeling. Several friends reappear—he has always been reluctant to turn old pensioners adrift. We have a rebellious king, a miser, an emperor disguised as a sannyasi, the emperor's wise companion (Thakurdada, who represents the wisdom which is in the gift of the fields and mountains): a youth whose character is unformed but generous, and a chorus of boys. There is plenty of symbolism, but no one need mind it as yet. King and emperor both rebel, but in what different fashion! The former rebels against wisdom and righteousness, grasping at power for power's sake; his overlord rebels against the bondage of the material and conventional, the chains with which his earthly greatness has bound him.

*Autumn-Festival* might have been composed as a commentary on the text: 'Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous.' As the emperor, the wisely-jovial throne-renouncing (even though now renouncing but for a day) monarch of Indian and mediæval European story, says: 'Simply with this rag on my back and a few boys as my followers, I was successful in making this day glorious.'<sup>2</sup> The mask is as sunny as *As You Like It*. As with that drama, it is hard to point to passages of definite poetry; the poetry is in the atmosphere, suffuses rather than shines. Its writing must have given the poet singular

<sup>1</sup> Mahalanobis.

<sup>2</sup> The poet's own translation.



pleasure. He returned to it in 1922, when he enlarged it by half as much again, renaming it *Repayment of Debt*.

*Atonement* (1909) was adapted from his early novel, *The Young Queen's Market*,

the only substantial addition being the addition of the character of Dhananjaya, an ascetic. In him there is a touch of mysticism, otherwise the play is quite straightforward. Rabindranath played the part of the Ascetic, who has a strong family likeness to Thakurdada. It is a *real* drama.<sup>1</sup>

This summary covers part of the facts, but not all. For, though *Atonement* is a *real* drama in the sense that its symbolism is subordinated to its action, yet that action is unsatisfactory and drags badly. There are many scenes, usually extremely brief—statuesque dialogue, by which the action seems never to get forward. Songs are lavish, the poet having a double excuse for them, in the Ascetic and in the character of Vasanta Ray,<sup>2</sup> a Vaishnava poet; they number no less than twenty-four. The play need not detain us, since its main lines were taken up by the poet, twelve years later, and worked over afresh into the most compact and best of his prose dramas, *The Free Current*. There we have again the Ascetic, the Prince whose mild government has won the affection of the subjects away from his stern father, the unimaginative, strong, essentially tyrannical King, and the subjects too poor to pay their taxes and encouraged in their contumacy by both Ascetic and Prince. We have the Prince's sacrifice of himself, less drastic in *Atonement*, since he merely goes on a pilgrimage which is the equivalent of banishment; and we have a doctrine of resisting might by power of patient endurance and a spiritual kingdom set over against a material. The last scenes of *Atonement* are impressive with the deep enthusiasm for renunciation sounding through them; the dialogue at the close attains a brevity which conveys the sense of profound emotion. But the masterly re-writing—for this is what it amounts to—in *The Free Current* has torn the life out of the earlier play, which can now stand simply

<sup>1</sup> Mahalanobis.

<sup>2</sup> A historical personage.

as a milestone in the poet's progress. It may be added that the title *Atonement* is taken from what is really only a sub-plot.

In 1910 appeared *Rājā—The King*, translated as *The King of the Dark Chamber*. It has both gained and lost in translation. The gain is by the partial omission of bands of strolling singers who clutter up the action with an aimless, almost imbecile revelry which becomes a convention in the poet's later dramas. Also, the scenes are freely rearranged, with a great access of compactness.

The play, which is very difficult to present, has been staged in Bengal with fair success. It has been played in Germany and (in 1922) in Paris. Its comparative failure on the stage is due to the fault which flaws it as literature. Its theme is sombrely impressive, a magnificent attempt to dramatize the secret dealings of God with the human heart. But for such a theme the most watchful economy is needed; the poet cannot afford the least suggestion of the whimsical or the trivial. Had Rabindranath cut away all the teasing irrelevancies, he would have lost nothing of sublimity, and his work would have cut a straight way to greatness. As it is, 'Thakurdada'—with much assistance, able though superfluous—spoils everything.

The Bengali stage was crowded with conventions that have no counterpart in life. One wearied of the female sannyasi who shows such insight and wisdom; wearied of the incessant and unprovoked singing. In Rabindranath, one escapes the *sannyāsini*; but that is small gain, for he had his own conventions, and let them settle woodenly upon his genius. Among them I do not include the constant singing; for when a man has an inexhaustible gift of pure song he must be thanked and not merely forgiven for using it, even though dramatic reality be lost by it. *Rājā* is crammed with songs, only a few of which appear in the English translation. The first two with their rapt exaltation build up the atmosphere of awe which the play requires. But 'Grandfather' is just a nuisance. He and his following of hilarious 'have-nothings' act as a regular chorus, and he introduces every new action of the play.



They form the bridge between *Autumn-Festival* and *Phālguni*, that darling work of the poet's later years.

Wisdom is justified of her children. Athens, criticized for convention and for producing an unreal drama, is now seen to have made drama perform certain functions with a minimum of convention. Bradley has pointed out how Shakespeare not only had his fools, whose supposed irresponsibility gave him a means of self-expression, but had a way of putting more of himself and of his views into one character than into others, so that this character served as his mouthpiece, or, on occasion, as the 'ideal spectator' whose representation was one of the functions of the Attic chorus. Ibsen came, forbidding the soliloquy, which went the way of the chorus. But our modern playwrights have not got rid of convention, or of the undramatic; and the chorus has a way of reappearing. Thomas Hardy has his choirs of aerial fantasies; Mr Masefield has his 'Gaffer', a sombre brother of Thakurdada; Rabindranath developed his own conventions, some of them, such as Thakurdada, strangely like those of Western playwrights. He has his madmen (even if 'Grandfather' is not to be given place among them); later, he is to have Baul, the blind bard. But his madmen are not sufficiently mad—poets' madmen never are. They are subtle mystics.

*Rājā* shows his symbolism full-grown. No longer can it be escaped. As is usual with him, he had long had the germ-thought of the play with him. Its English title is a phrase occurring in *Kheyā*. *Rājā* suffers from his lack of a ruthless technique. Compression, the excision of extraneous make-believe—this is what it needs. The allegory itself brings in much of the make-believe. It goes into detail, remorselessly, refusing the reader a single normal moment; goes so into detail that sometimes it has almost the effect of sarcasm, as in the Queen's apology for giving the singers her jewels:

Dear boys of the hermitage! how shall I reward you? This necklace is but made of jewels, hard stones—its hardness will give you pain—I have nothing like the garlands of flowers you have on.

There are moments of noble poetry lighting up *Rājā*, sown like stars through its mist of symbolism. There is the Dark King's speech to the Queen—utterly out of keeping with the character of the speaker, yet so lovely in itself :

The darkness of the infinite heavens, whirled into life and being by the power of my love, has drawn the light of a myriad stars into itself, and incarnated itself in a form of flesh and blood. And in that form, what æons of thought and striving, untold yearnings of limitless skies, the countless gifts of unnumbered seasons !

There is the rhetoric of the Queen's lament :

Why do the torches of morning not flare up for me all over the world ? Why does not the earth quake and tremble ? Is my fall but the unobserved dropping of the puny bean-flower ? Is it not more like the fall of a glowing star whose fiery blazon bursts the heavens asunder ?

It is wonderful that a foreigner should handle our difficult tongue as in that last sentence, one of the many lines of blank verse embedded in his translations, a flash of Elizabethan rhetoric :

Whose fiery blazon bursts the heavens asunder ?

Lastly, the fourth act reaches intensity and drama, with the Queen's sense of humiliation.

The play contains more than his usual side-glances, flashes of sarcasm or polemic. It began what is now a regular feature of his plays, their political innuendo; which in *The Free Current* is so obvious that in foreign countries it was erroneously supposed to be just an attack on the British Government in India. *Rājā* shows with striking intensity what may be called his republicanism. We are often told that republicanism is not a doctrine which grows naturally on Indian soil, yet Rabindranath is reported to have told a Western interviewer that he believed India would become a republic. We have seen that he often stands apart from the main currents of Indian feeling ; and it is characteristic of his keen intellectuality that he should be won by the appeal to his mind when tradition might have drawn him elsewhere. His plays have plenty of kings ; but they are usually abdicating, or wanting to abdicate, or in the end



learn to abdicate—that is, the true kings, the kinglets often being rascals, mere foils for their overlord's virtues. The King in *Rājā* refuses to exercise any of the ordinary prerogatives of kingship, to punish treason or resent insult.

*Rājā* was found obscure by his own countrymen. This may be in part the fault of what I have called his elvish plots, and his capricious freaks of construction. Neither Kanchi nor the Queen, as presented, is explicable. He leaves out far too much of the working, which neither dramatist nor examinee can do. All through *The King of the Dark Chamber* may be felt the pulsing of a great idea, the dramatization of the truth that the service of God demands all one is and has. Yet the idea gleams more faintly than need be through the mist of allegory and the thickets of verbiage, the irrational and irrelevant jubilation of 'Grandfather', and the preachments of that annoying person, Surangama.

The symbolism of *Rājā* is carried a stage further in the next play, *The Post-Office*, where we have it very gently and touchingly expressed. The play has been translated by other hands than the poet's, and is therefore one of his few works that are truthfully represented in the English text. Written in prose throughout, without even a song,<sup>1</sup> its texture is filmy and of the very stuff of dreams. It was an emphatic favourite of the author. Its popularity in Germany gave him especial pleasure; and it succeeded in London also. 'It is very effective on the stage', he told me. 'I saw it acted in Berlin. I heard it recited by a great French actor, and it is to be staged in Paris.' He rejected the notion that these later dramas, all of which were done for his boys at Santiniketan, were 'what you call allegorical. I am very fond of them, and to me they are just like other plays. To me, they are very concrete'.<sup>2</sup> This fondness grew, with that turning back to his boyhood which was characteristic of these later years of his. Amal, he said, was his own youth.

Further, *The Post-Office* was an especial favourite, not

<sup>1</sup> Songs were introduced into it in 1918.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation.

only with the author, but with all those whom, in default of any other word, I must call Tagorites. I have spoken of its popularity in Berlin and Paris. Mr Yeats has borne testimony to its effectiveness with certain English and Irish schools of thought. 'On the stage the little play shows that it is very perfectly constructed, and conveys to the right audience an emotion of gentleness and peace.' This I believe to be true, and I think I understand why it has such a deep place in the love of the poet's Indian readers also. Yet I think they overrate it, and that its rank will fall as time goes on. Saying this, I frankly admit that it is literature of a kind that makes small appeal to me, though I believe I can see its merits, in an objective and entirely intellectual fashion. I think its great vogue among his Indian followers, at any rate, was partly due to accidents, not least to the fact that the poet himself took the part of Thakurdada superbly and unforgettably. When Rabindranath acted, he laid a spell upon his audience, which lasted while memory lived.

Having disqualified myself by this confession of inability to place myself in this instance among good Tagorites, I must briefly indicate what seem to me the qualities and faults of the play. The poet builds upon a substructure of sentimentalism. Tears lay very close to the surface of his imaginative countrymen, and with them a pathetic situation was half the battle. But Aristophanes was right when he denounced Euripides, because that great poet sometimes harrowed audiences by the methods of the street-beggar who borrows a sick child. The clamour of the children of dying Alcestis was no doubt as popular with whatever the Athenians had that took the place of our school prize-givings, as Shakespeare's Arthur pleading with Hubert has been in our day. In *The Post-Office* only the poet's skill has avoided catastrophe; if the language had been a shade less perfect in simplicity and naturalness, the play would have sagged downward, into a hopeless mush and welter of sentimentalism.

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *The Post-Office*.



Other flaws are—I must think—Rabindranath's Thakurdada, whose appearance many readers must come to dread, though they know him to be inevitable when the poet gets on to certain moods. The justification is, of course, that the characters of these later plays have all moved away from the full-blooded life of drama, into folk-lore and the conventional life of allegory and miracle-play. That would be vindication, if we had not had Thakurdada so often and if the poet kept him in his place; but this he never does, weighting him with a significance that he cannot bear, without being put out of proportion with his world. A kindred fault is, Rabindranath's introduction of what many will call fads of his own. A play of such appealing straightforwardness and simplicity cannot afford to contain anything so explosive as satire. We know that Rabindranath dislikes pandits and all sorts of officials, and the pretentious are bound to be made foolish when he handles them, as the doctor and headman are here. But this reminder of the poet's strong prejudices vexes the reader. Lastly, the ending of the play is melodrama, after all that truthfulness. We tire of these mysterious kings, who always come at midnight. Yes, they are allegorical and they are deeply significant; but that is the more reason why they should have appeared once in his work, and once only.

Yet *The Post-Office* is a moving piece of work. It is full of feeling, and the handling is delicate. The language is of an unsurpassable naturalness, the speech of the streets purged of all its grossness yet robbed of not one drop of raciness. The dialogue flows in even unhurried stream. We understand and sympathize, as everyone falls in love with Amal. The talk is such as every Indian village knows, the characters walk every Indian bazaar. The play's pathos and easy simplicity will survive even that incongruous 'king' at the end, the king who is apparently an Eastern *rājā*—if so, he is not altogether out of place, as a 'king' is—yet has a brand-new red post-office of the British Government; who does not come himself yet is represented, with or without his knowledge, by his unexpected and unnecessary officials. I have given my reasons for thinking that the poet's admirers

claim too much for the play. But it is touching, of one texture of simplicity throughout, and within its limits an almost perfect piece of art. It does successfully what both Shakespeare and Kalidasa failed to do, brings on to the stage a child who neither 'shows off' nor is silly.

Symbolism and sarcasm reappear in *Achalāyatan*—*The Castle of Conservatism*. 'The Institution of Fixed Beliefs' is the translation the poet suggested to me, which is nearer to the literal meaning, 'Immovable House'. The satire is obvious and contemptuous, and the play is an elaborate mockery of extreme orthodoxy. As a drama, it is just a long-drawn-out frolic, its seriousness of meaning alone making it more than pleasant, and often delightful, foolery. This seriousness was promptly recognized by the inmates of Hinduism's Achalayatan, who saw themselves depicted as the residents of a vast lunatic asylum. The poet softened the blow by replying to his critics that he criticized only Hindu social customs. But his critics had the wit to see that, if everything that a Hindu does is religion, as we used to be told, it came to the same thing. 'It made a great row,' he observed to me.

The play's teaching reflects many schools of religious thought. It obviously owes something to Christianity, perhaps more than any other book of his. It owes much to such modern Hindu movements as that of Ramkrishna and Vivekananda, which inculcate the oneness of all religions. Its fable was probably suggested by *The Princess*, and, more remotely, *The Castle of Indolence* and *The Faerie Queen*. It contains a great deal of very jolly mockery and parody, much serious comment on life and religion, and some exquisite songs. Panchak, a chief character, is a very pleasant fellow. It appeared in *Pravāsi*, in 1911.

*The Post-Office* and *Gītānjali* belong to the same period; the lyrics in the latter book are dated between 1907 and 1910. The poet's own comments on the two books may be taken together.

I was very restless, just as I am now. That gave me the idea of a child pining for freedom, and the world anxious to keep it in its bounds, for it has its duties there, and that sort of thing. I was



anxious to know the world. At that time, I thought that it was in the West that the spirit of humanity was experimenting and working. My restlessness became intolerable. I wrote *Dākghar*<sup>1</sup> in three or four days. About the same time, I wrote *Gitānjali*. Most of the pieces were written at Santiniketan. I used to write almost every day, and sometimes in the night. I did not intend to publish them. I knew people would be disappointed, and would say that after *Sonār Tari*<sup>2</sup> they were very poor. But I knew they were very intimately my own.<sup>3</sup>

Those who lived at Santiniketan remembered the period, and the poet's wandering form in the moonlit mango-groves. He slept very little, often for only three or four hours; he rose about four o'clock, and usually retired at ten. Moonlight called him abroad always; and when moonlight coincided with a phase of lyrical excitement, he would become 'beside himself', in a veritable ecstasy, and spend his nights drifting among the trees.

The *Gitānjali* songs have become world-famous, for they form a large part of the English book of that name. The book has had such a rebirth into our Western tongue, that a considerable literature has gathered round it. This renders it superfluous for me to do more than indicate, in a very few sentences, three or four characteristics of these songs. It would be churlish to find the collection monotonous; nevertheless, the eager delight with which one enters this gentle paradise flags at intervals, before one gets to the end of its hundred and fifty-nine poems. That delight experiences constant renewal, of the freshest, most joyous sort. But the best fifty of these songs are outstanding in their beauty and appeal, and make a far richer book than the whole. I say this, weary of saying it.

*Gitānjali* brings the poet into closer and more familiar contact with the natural world than any previous book. This is not to say that its natural effects are truer or brighter or lovelier than many that have been attained by him before. It is a matter of atmosphere, of being steeped in sound and sight and colour. The book's mood is grey, its key is almost always minor, its pictures mournful, or, at best, untouched

<sup>1</sup> *The Post-Office.*

<sup>2</sup> *The Golden Boat.*

<sup>3</sup> Conversation.

by exhilaration. Probably the impression of monotony comes from this oneness of mood, an impression as of a wind wailing through rainy woods, and from the fact that the book gets its effects out of the merest handful of illustrations. Rarely was fine poetry, one thinks, made out of less variety; rain and cloud, wind and rising river, boatmen, lamps, temples and gongs, flutes and *vinās*, birds flying home at dusk, travellers tired or with provisions exhausted, flowers opening and falling. It is astonishing what range the poet gets out of these few things—they are far too naturally and purely used here to be called properties, as they justifiably might be in much of his work. W. B. Yeats speaks of these songs as being ‘as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and rushes’.<sup>1</sup> They are. Almost every line of *Gītānjali* is crammed with natural things. Yet Rabindranath was not a close observer of the smaller differences, as many English poets have been. To him a bird was a bird, with a possible variation between half a dozen species; a flower was a flower, a leaf was a leaf. I can well believe that to him any perception of difference between bird and bird, or flower and flower—I am not denying that he knows a hawk from a handsaw, or a rose from a *mālātī*-blossom—would seem almost like quibbling. But we must remember that the detailed knowledge of Nature that marks our English poets today is a recent thing. The Elizabethans managed to get all the freshness of wind and grove out of a limited knowledge. *The Scholar Gipsy* and *Thyrsis* ushered in an age in which poets, however deficient otherwise, have generally known their countryside. I believe the enrichment of English poetry has been very great, and that the outlines of a most exquisite loveliness have been brought to sight, after long blurring. But we must not forget that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written a quarter of a millennium before *Thyrsis*; and much dew-drenched poetry besides. Similarly Rabindranath, with birds that are birds and flowers that are flowers, has written, in *Gītānjali*, a book whose every poem conveys

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *Gītānjali*.



the impression of having been composed in the open air, or before open windows. The general outlines of the woods and the flitting passage of birds, 'deep in their unknown day's employ', are present all the time; and wind and bee and bird rustle and call. Once, at least, this steeping of his spirit in the world wells out into an exuberant gladness.

Let all the strains of joy mingle in my last song:—the joy that makes the earth flow over in the riotous excess of the grass, the joy that sets the twin brothers, life and death, dancing over the wide world, the joy that sweeps in with the tempest, shaking and waking all life with laughter, the joy that sits still with its tears on the open red lotus of pain, and the joy that throws everything it has upon the dust, and knows not a word.<sup>1</sup>

The poet felt that these poems were 'very intimately my own'. Mingled with perfect revivals of characteristics already found in *Naivedya* or earlier books—his ethical earnestness, his scorn of sham, most of all of sham discovered within his own soul, his utter dependence upon God—are regrets and thankfulness which saints have doubtless felt before but not often expressed; as when he blesses his Lord for the forbearance with which He refrains from coming into his days.<sup>2</sup> It was through the English *Gitanjali* that I got my first introduction to his poetry, and I confess myself to this day so under its spell that I cannot appraise it with any degree of accuracy. The book has spoken to countless hearts, has been a revelation of what they felt and experienced, and cannot ever be forgotten.

As the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth. At every moment the heart of this poet flows outward to these without derogation or condescension, for it has known that they will understand; and it has filled itself with the circumstance of their lives.<sup>3</sup>

It brings us very close to a religious experience which is universal, yet intensely individual; an experience which is one with the writer's life, no alien dress but the natural

<sup>1</sup> (E.) *Gitanjali*, 58.    <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 32.    <sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, Introduction to *Gitanjali*.

growth of his days. His poems have led him to God;<sup>1</sup> his sorrows and failures have shown him God. His restlessness, of which his words speak, in my quotation from his talk, is in the book, deepening the minor tone. His anxiety to mix with the simple life of men, wherever he can find it at its fullest, is also here.

I stand not where Thou comest down and ownest Thy self as mine, there to clasp Thee to my heart and take Thee as my comrade. Thou art the Brother amongst my brothers, but I heed them not, I divide not my earnings with them, thus sharing my all with Thee. In pleasure and in pain I stand not by the side of men, and thus stand by Thee. I shrink to give up my life, and thus do not plunge into the great waters of life.<sup>2</sup>

No less present is his watchful fear of being absorbed in this outward world, so that he forgets the world's Lord.

Oh, grant me my prayer that I may never lose the bliss of the touch of the One in the play of the many.<sup>3</sup>

The imagery and thought of *Gītānjali* are more Indian than in any previous book. An untranslated poem even celebrates Hari;<sup>4</sup> many of the pieces, of course, remember Radha. He makes magnificent use of what is the most appealing thing in that story, Love's search through the tempest.

I can see nothing before me. I wonder where comes Thy chariot?<sup>5</sup> By what dim shore of the ink-black river, by what far edge of the frowning forest, through what mazy depths of gloom art Thou threading Thy course to come to me, my friend?<sup>6</sup>

He had used this legend often before, but in such a way as to make it seem that it was for its pictorial quality; now he cut to its heart, and enabled at least one Christian reader to understand how such a story could rouse religious enthusiasm.

Lastly, the metrical achievement of *Gītānjali* is impeccable. The poems were written to be sung; but they sing themselves.

<sup>1</sup> (E.) *Gitanjali*, 101.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>4</sup> Krishna.

<sup>5</sup> I have substituted the *chariot* of the Bengali for the English version's *path*.

<sup>6</sup> (E.) *Gitanjali*, 23.



## THE SECOND 'EMERGENCE', INTO WORLD REPUTATION

*Gitānjali* coincided with a long period of harvest, chiefly in connexion with his educational activities. He was issuing the *Sāntiniketan* addresses and writing his *Reminiscences*. As he used much of the substance of his prose religious and ethical writings as the material of his addresses and lectures in the West, the interested reader will be familiar with their characteristics. The present study, overcharged already with the barest scrutiny of his verse and dramas, must leave them on one side. They are beautifully written, and his glancing mobile thought and intuitions have found in them effective expression.

In 1910 his mood changed. As he might have put it himself, the keen summons of the world's flute sounded in his ears, and pierced his seclusion. He grew sated with retirement, and eager for one of those periods of traffic with the market-place that proved so refreshing to his spirit. I have referred to his appearance in Calcutta, and intense work for some months, in the effort to lift the parent conservative body of the Brahmo Samaj into the full stream of national and democratic activity. After that failure he had returned to Santiniketan. Again, after more than a year of absolute seclusion, his old restlessness returned, stronger than ever. Fortunately, it came at the same time as such a call from the outer world as few poets have had. Dramatic was this emergence and to a wonderful and far-voyaging journey, though the call, when it came, came almost as a delay. It came from his own people. Rabindranath, burning to travel to the West and plunge into that fuller life of which he thought it held the secret, was delayed by the *Sābityaparishad*, the Bengal Literary Academy. To celebrate his jubilee, his countrymen gave

him an unparalleled ovation. The experience must have been moving in the extreme, to a poet so deeply patriotic. For the time, all misunderstanding was swept away and educated Bengal joined in recognition. On 28th January, 1912, Calcutta Town Hall was packed with a wildly enthusiastic audience, in which every branch of activity was fully represented.

The experience proved too much for him. He had been in intense pain for a long time, physical suffering having succeeded to his protracted mental distress; and for the next two years it seemed as if he must soon die. One thing that drove him to the West was the hope of recovering health. C. F. Andrews told me how wasted he looked. 'In fact, I can't believe that this robust fellow is the same person. I always have a picture of him as he looked then in London, wretched and broken.' On his return from England, after the visit which made him famous, he was persuaded to undergo an operation. An English specialist took the case, and handled it with a patience and kindness that the poet never forgot. Had operating not taken place, Andrews said, Rabindranath could not have lived out the year. He was saved; and never suffered again in the same way.

Illness followed his ovation in the Town Hall, prostrating him on the very morning when he should have sailed for England. His doctor forbade him to move, and enjoined a month's absolute rest.

So I went to Shileida, and simply to while away time I translated those *Gitanjali* songs. For they were very dear to me, and I wanted to have the pleasure of going over them a second time. I felt sure my translations were only schoolboy exercises. So I showed them to Ajit, who said they were quite good. Also, on the steamer I went on translating, which gave me great pleasure. I reached London, and stayed in a hotel. Here I suffered great disappointment. Everyone seemed like phantoms. The hotel used to empty after breakfast, and I watched the crowded streets. I was in despair, and thought of coming back. It was not possible to know this humanity, or enter into the heart of another place. Then it occurred to me to try to get into touch with Rothenstein. I had met him at Abanindranath's place, but no one had told him I was a poet; he just knew me as



one of the Tagore family. So I looked up his telephone number, and rang him up; and he came at once, and got me better lodgings. You know that Vale of Health, in Hampstead—absurd name! Well, he got me a house there. He was my neighbour, and came often to see me. Then, one day he said he had heard I was a poet. Could I give him any idea of my work? I told him I had some prose translations, but knew the English was not good. However, he took them. After a day or two, he came back quite excited, and said they were the most wonderful things he had ever seen. I thought he was an artist and didn't understand literature; he saw from my face that I didn't believe him. He had copies typed, and sent them to Yeats, Stopford Brooke, and Bradley. Bradley replied that he had never expected to find a real poet. The other two were very excited, too. So Rothenstein gave a reading at his house—Yeats read to a group of people—Miss May Sinclair and Nevinson were there. That was where I met Andrews—I had not met him before. Yeats read some very short poems, while I was miserable. How could these make any impression? I asked. They would glide over their minds. You know, your people are not demonstrative, and they made no sign. I was quite angry with Yeats for doing me this injustice! Next day letters came from Miss Sinclair and other people; I was startled by their tone. But gradually I saw they were quite sincere.<sup>1</sup>

The best of all his own translations, the English *Gitanjali*, is a haunted book. He had spent so much time with these versions, in India and on his voyage to England, that the book was essentially a new one; his personality had passed into it. Despite its name, it contains translations, not only from the Bengali *Gitanjali* but from a number of other works.

After a visit to America, following his English stay, he returned to India, in the early autumn of 1913. The tide of fame was still running strongly, and had not attained its height. At the landing-stage in Bombay, he found a crowd waiting with garlands—he thought, for some official, but it was for him. He was mobbed with praise as he fled across India. On the evening of a day in the first week of November, when I was staying at Santiniketan, suddenly a hubbub arose, and the masters rushed up with a sheaf of telegrams. 'We have great news. Mr Tagore has won the Nobel Prize.' A minute later he entered. It was a time of great

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

happiness for us all. The boys did not know what the Nobel Prize was, but they understood that their *gurudeb*<sup>1</sup> had done something wonderful, as he was always doing. They formed ranks and marched round the *āshram*, singing, '*Āmāder Sāntiniketan*'.<sup>2</sup> They would not go by the guesthouse a second time, but gathered at the door till the poet went to it. He was greeted with a frenzy of worship, one after another throwing himself down and touching his feet. He stood with hands to his face, palms together, deprecating their homage; and, when Ajit Chakravarti flung himself down, he tried to stop him. Everyone shouted and sang. At last the boys dispersed and made a huge bonfire.

Rabindranath told me the award was not altogether a surprise. When in England, he had been asked to send copies of his books and press-cuttings to the Nobel Prize Committee. Now his success depressed him:

I shall never get any peace again. I shall be worried with appeals, all kinds of people will be writing to me. My heart sank when I saw those people at Bombay and realized that they were going to make a public show of me there.

He withdrew into himself, and turned again to writing songs, published since in two books. The first of these, *Gitimālya—Song-Garland*—though published in 1920, was written between 1908 and 1914, some of the best pieces being written during the English sojourn, or when returning upon the high seas. This is perhaps his greatest book of songs. The criticisms I have passed on the others apply to this also, but in smaller measure. The book is one of his most joyful, full of songs of service, of trust in God, of thankfulness for the beauty of the world.

Oft thou touchest me with dawn,  
Swiftly, laughingly withdrawn!  
Came what messenger of late,  
Pushing past sleep's closed gate?  
Waking to the search, I find  
That my eyes with tears are blind.

<sup>1</sup> 'Teacher-god.'

<sup>2</sup> 'Our Santiniketan', the School-song.



Then . . . as if the blue sky had  
 Whispered heavenly things,  
 Every leaping limb is glad,  
 Till my body sings.  
 Now my heart her dew-drenched eyes  
 Lifts like buds of sacrifice ;  
 Onward to her boundless rest  
 Runs my life, with brimming breast.<sup>1</sup>

The songs are full of retrospect, of weighing of life.

Once my life, in pomp of spring,  
 Flowered within her myriad ring.  
     A hundred-petalled bloom, she threw  
     Largesse of a leaf or two,  
 Having handfuls left to fling.

Now a fruit, she strews no more  
 Petals on the orchard-floor ;  
     Now her days are at their fall,  
     Now she gives herself, her all,  
 Weighted with her juicy store.<sup>2</sup>

No. 2 has a charming reminiscence of folk-story, which shows us that his old days, though finished, are not so far as to be out of hail :

To our *pārul*-sister's wood today,  
 Invited guests, let's make our way,  
 And in shade of the *chāmpā*-brothers' boughs  
 Gather together !

Another, 40, makes superb theft of the opening of the most haunting of all earlier Bengali lyrics, Ramprasad's ' This day will surely pass, Mother, this day will pass '. Rabindranath keeps the refrain :

I know this day will pass,  
     This day will pass—  
 That one day, some day,  
 The dim sun with tender smiling  
 Will look in my face  
     His last farewell.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Crossing*, 38.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Fruit-Gathering*, 2.

Beside the way the flute will sound,  
The herds will graze on the river-bank,  
The children will play in the courtyards,  
The birds will sing on.  
Yet this day will pass,  
This day will pass.

This is my prayer,  
My prayer to Thee :  
That ere I go I may learn  
Why the green Earth,  
Lifting her eyes to the sky,  
Called me to her ;  
Why the silence of the Night  
Told me of the stars,  
Why the Day's glory  
Raised waves in my soul.  
This is my prayer to Thee.

When Earth's revolutions  
For me are ended,  
In the finishing of my song  
Let me pause a moment,  
That I may fill my basket  
With the flowers and fruits of the Six Seasons ;  
That in the light of this life  
I may see Thee in going,  
That I may garland Thee in going  
With the garland from my own throat—  
When Earth's revolutions for me are ended.

His work contains nothing more perfect in tenderness ; his own beautiful English version<sup>1</sup> has made it known the world over.

103 makes use of everyday imagery :

Yonder are Thy herds of sun and stars,  
Thy cows of light :  
There Thou dost sit, playing Thy flute,  
Pasturing them in the vast sky.

86 seems to remember Christ's solemn warning to His followers to watch, lest coming suddenly He take them unawares :

<sup>1</sup> *Fruit-Gathering*, 51.



They have all gone to the woods in this moonlit night,  
 In the wind that is drunken with Spring's delight.  
 But I will not go, will not go ;  
 I will stay in the house, and so  
 Wait in my lonely corner—this night  
 I will not go in this wind that is drunk with delight.  
 Rather, this room with care  
 I must scour and cleanse and prepare ;  
 For . . . if He remembers me, then  
 He will come, though I know not when.  
 They must wake me swiftly ! I will not fare  
 Out where the drunk wind reels through the air.

There are many fine poems of wind and wave, some of them translated in *Crossing*. There are many subtle and lovely allegories, such as 66.<sup>1</sup> 99<sup>2</sup> is a passionate pæan of praise for the body. 34<sup>3</sup> is nobly ethical. Some of the finest of the English *Gitanjali* are from *Gitimālya*. 23 is the famous first poem of the English book ; 26 is the hardly less famous and equally fine song of farewell, in the same book.<sup>4</sup> Such poems as 25 and 27—and there are many of them—give us his mysticism at its best, with a fresh breeze beating through it, and the light of the open sky falling about it. He wanders after God's chariot, in the track of sun and moon. 29<sup>5</sup> makes the old splendid use of natural process. 30 is the famous and grand poem which is 53 in the English *Gitanjali*. He cultivated this sterner side of his genius too little.

The last poem of *Gitimālya* epitomizes the book's message and attitude :

In my evenings Thou hast come, in beautiful raiment ;  
 I salute Thee.  
 In the heart of my darkness Thou hast laughed ;  
 I salute Thee.  
 In this downcast, still, deep, placid sky  
 I salute Thee.  
 In this gentle, peaceful, sleepy wind  
 I salute Thee.

<sup>1</sup> *Fruit-Gathering*, 70.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 72 (a part-paraphrase).

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> (E.) *Gitanjali*, 93.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 68.

On the grassy couch of this tired earth  
 I salute Thee.  
 In this silent incantation of the steadfast stars  
 I salute Thee.  
 In this lonely resthouse, at work's end,  
 I salute Thee.  
 In the flowery garland of this fragrant evening sky  
 I salute Thee.

*Gitāli—Songs*—the second book, is a much less valuable assemblage. It contains 108 pieces, the number of beads on a Vaishnava rosary; and the artificial character suggested by this exact number is borne out by the details of the collection. The poems were written for music, and the words are of very subordinate importance. They have his lyric grace and lightness, but their content is nothing. Since the poetry is the slave of music, the pieces appear on the printed page like the elaborate conceits in form of the Caroline lyrists, who wrote poems in the shape of crosses and altars; the tune has dictated the shape. Large sections, poems all of ten or of twelve lines, variously divided into stanzas, make it seem as if the poet were trying to naturalize French forms, and to give us a rosary of *rondeaux*. I have his word that this resemblance is accidental; but there is real resemblance of character, as well as of form. The resemblance of form may be seen from his own description: 'First, there is the refrain, then the amplification of it; then the refrain is repeated, and the amplification also, but the latter is modified.' Most of the pieces are made of the old stuff which he kept so plentifully on hand. Long before the rosary is counted, we weary most utterly of storms and boats, helmsmen and travellers, flowers and flutes and lamps. He has no book which has so large a proportion of pieces worthless as poetry, and his technical skill is wasted.

There are good things, of course. No. 13 is a *Rains* piece, charged with feeling:

Once again comes *Śrāvan* back  
 Veiling skies with mist and wrack.



Lost are stars, and lost the sun ;  
 Lost, the ways in darkness run ;  
     Waves are on the river swelling.

Earth and sky are all  
 Filled with the Rains' call.

Pours to earth the rain ;  
 For me, too, dark night is knelling,  
     Sounding through every vein.

20 is a famous song, admirable in directness and strength :

In His one hand are pearls ;  
 A sword is in His other—  
     He that now thy door has broken.

He came not to beg,  
 But out of strife and conquest  
 To bear away thy soul—  
     He that now thy door has broken.

Along the road of Death,  
 Into thy life He came—  
     He that now thy door has broken.

Never will He go with half !  
 Of all thou art He will  
 Be absolute sole Lord !—  
     He that now thy door has broken.

26 is a lovely autumn song :

Your dear hands with your red radiance filling,  
 Autumn, you went, that rosy beauty spilling !

And with your dewy tresses,  
 And tumbled robes that toss on the woodland way,  
     Autumn, Dawn's heart is wildly troubled today !

82 begins a group of deeper feeling and thought. He refuses to turn away pain, for by it he has found God. 87 contains a profound touch. The mother is unknown to her child yet proves its chief good when born ; so will

Death prove to us. 92 emphasizes that their way is known to the birds and the seasons ; man alone has to ask :

In the birds' wings lies hidden  
The knowledge of their way ;  
The stars cloak with their flames  
Their destination ;  
In their six painted chariots  
The Six Seasons come and go, uncharted ;  
I alone ask tidings  
Of my unknown way.

106 is an ecstatic song of greeting to the new life. 107 is an elaborate poem, in his more architectural manner, with well-handled stanzas. It opens :

Evening has taken into her dark basket  
The lotus of the shut light.  
When she reaches the shore of new dawn,  
The soft lotus of itself will open.  
I am a pilgrim on that road to the Mount of Rising,  
I am walking alone in Evening's wake,  
While Day's end falls on my horizon.

108 is a stately 'sonnet' of farewell.

*Gitāli*, like so much of his work, must be judged simply as word-music. Nevertheless, when so much work of one kind comes from the same poet, it suffers, however perfect.

I conclude with a few detached passages :

Night opens her red eyes  
In the blazing light of the Terrible God. (No. 10.)

There's a trembling in the wind,  
A fear on the ripe rice—

It shakes in the full fields ! (16—lines that might be by  
Yeats.)

Delay no more, no more !  
Out flaps the light !

Lo, at my door  
The listening Night ! (17.)

The flood rushes in  
From the Sea of the Full Moon—  
It rugs at my life. (21.)



With heart which fears o'erwhelm  
 You watch the black clouds of the storm !  
 Look to your Pilot's form !  
 Lo ! how He laughs beside the helm ! (30.)

On the sky's rim Disaster  
 Rises, with laughter on laughter !  
 Destruction riots in my hair  
 And in my dress. (33.)

See where Evening flings away  
 Her ornaments of gold !  
 With star-flowers crams her hands instead—  
 Wild through the sky her locks are spread—  
 And with her worship fills the darkness.

Gently she lays her tiredness down  
 In the nests of sleeping birds ;  
 Her rosary in the wood's deep shade,  
 Of burning firefly-jewels made,  
 Hides in her breast, and counts and counts. (61.)

But he quickly showed that his mind had been resting only, and was not by any means exhausted. *Balākā*, his greatest book of lyrics, was written between 1914 and 1916, at the height of his world-wide recognition. Its title, *A Flight of Cranes*, is symbolical, for migratory birds have always stood for the soul in its passage through these phenomenal skies to eternity. The title has a special fitness, for these lyrics are pilgrim-songs, eagerly looking beyond this plane of time and sense to other lives, whether reincarnate here or placed beyond our sun and stars. The poet is over fifty years of age, and to him has come the same experience as to Dryden when over seventy, when thoughts crowded so thick and fast upon him that his only care was whether to versify them or 'to run them into the other harmony of prose'. His favourite imagery is of a river. In this there is nothing new ; but the river is now not always, or even usually, one which flows through these lands of his sojourn. Often it is an aerial river, the magnificent streaming of that space-flood on whose eddies the stars are floating lilies. In these lyrics his intellectual greatness is revealed. His mind is like a spring from whose

depths thoughts and similes bubble incessantly. The effervescence of ideas is never checked for a moment, and especially notable is the flow of abstract ideas. The life of grass and blossom is as dear as ever, and even more delightfully handled; but the poet is not the slave of his fancy, a sterner or, at any rate, a stronger mood being in possession of his fleeting moments.

The lateness of many of his developments is very noteworthy. From one point of view the most precocious of poets, already voluminous while in his teens, from another he is the most slow and orderly in development. That is why a selection from the work of all his periods would show him as a greater poet than he seems either in the pitiless completeness of his Bengali text or the haphazard mutilation of his English one. In *Balākā*, not only has the more abstract side of his mind found expression at last, but in diction he has struck a balance, after his experiments, between the colloquial tongue and the rich Sanskrit vocabulary. This balance is as perfect as can be, a marriage of poise and dignity, of lissom ease and power. The critics have Rabindranath's gracious permission, as once Tennyson's, to blaspheme. 'Let them rave!' As for this undignified *chalita bhāṣā*,<sup>1</sup>

. . . let the Sufi flout !  
Of this base metal shall be filed a key  
That shall unlock the door he howls without.

In the opening poem, an invocation from the 'old poet' to the spirit of youth, to the new age, iconoclastic and rebellious, diction and thought are rollicking. The old are grey parrots, screening their foolish heads under their wings; the young flirt disrespectful tails, to a delighted poet's encouragement.

The form of *Balākā* is extraordinarily free. He can do what he likes with metre and rhythm, and he no longer cares for any rules except those that justify themselves by resultant beauty or force. Sometimes his metres stream

<sup>1</sup> Literally, 'walking language'.



and scatter over the page, like fountains making their way down a Himalayan height. There is practically nothing second-rate. The least important group of lyrics are altogether joy-bringing. There is the song of untimely Spring, of the impetuous flowers that, 'pushing before all with shrill, high laughter, blossomed and fell in heaps'.<sup>1</sup> These, in love with death,

O crazy ones, O heedless of cost-reckoning ! ' Drunk with the sound of his footsteps from afar, you spread your deaths over the dust of his path for that guest ! Neither seeing nor hearing, you burst your bonds, you would not wait for vision of your eyes.

Then there is the dancing lyric<sup>2</sup> which contrasts the two goddesses of his imagination, superbly sung by him so often. Here is great praise of Autumn, personified as Lakshmi seen 'in the fulness of the fruitful gold-beautiful peace of the dewy season'. Hardly less is the praise of Urvashi, she who 'with both hands scatters the delirium of Spring, in blood-red *palās*-flowers and roses, and in the song of unsleeping youth'.

Another group of poems mirror his religious experience. These are deeper than those of *Gītānjali*; their flights are wider and more sustained. His human love, ever since the first fine careless rapture of the pre-*Mānasi* period was finished, showed increasingly a tendency to merge into the divine love. Now we have reached a third stage, in which the human love is never more than a starting-point, from which the divine love takes off. Thus, in the *Boatman*<sup>3</sup> lyric we know that the singular figure who ventures out in such a storm with only the burden of a white rose is a symbol. It is one of his fine Padma storms, finer than ever; but these earthly waters will now carry to the end un earthly voyagers and the flicker of ghostly sails. All his sublimity of imagery crowds the great *Oarsmen*<sup>4</sup> poem. His exhilaration rises, at this prospect of life upon life, all creation, rushing to apparent extinction.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Lover's Gift*, 52.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Fruit-Gathering*, 41.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 84.

In their hundreds they rush to death, like the stars in their myriads to the light of dawn. The blood of heroes, the tears of mothers, will all this worth be lost in the dust of the Earth? Will not Heaven be bought with it?

It is true that he spoils this passage, with its superb rhetoric and its flashing imagination, by adding the question, 'Will not the Treasurer of the Universe repay so vast a debt?' But, if he resembles Wordsworth in such prosy interjections amid sublimest beauties, he resembles him also in the way his peaks of lofty thought are tinted with the sunrise of imagination. In these poems winds 'from worlds not quickened by the sun' cast their shadows on verse whose serenity they fail to ruffle.

The *Oarsmen* poem was written in mid-throe of the Great War, in 1916. To his horror-struck gaze an evil age was breaking up amid anguish ineffable. He hated the arrogance of the strong. Yet it is characteristic of him that in this poem he insists that the 'cowardice of the weak' and 'the rancour of the destitute' are equally culpable. He has never been one to console the shrinking and feeble-willed, by casting all blame upon the vigorous and bold.

The profound peace of these poems is the most healing thing imaginable. Even in those which are songs of battle, this central core of rest remains untroubled. He speaks of the glimpses which have come to him here:

He to whom I shall sing that song on the banks of new light is with me all day, encircling my earth. In the *siuli*-groves of Autumn He walks, veiled with the fragrance of flowers. In *Phālgun* He puts on my head His garland of wooing. In a twist of the path suddenly He shows Himself, though but for a moment! In the twilight He sits alone on the lonely heath. Thus He orders His comings and goings. Thus, making blow through the heart's forest His wind laden with pain, He goes, whispering and with murmurs.<sup>2</sup>

A thought on which he insists repeatedly is man's necessity to God. 'Thus, day after day, You buy Your sunrise in my eyes,'<sup>3</sup> he says. In some of these poems his extreme

<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, *On an Evening of Extraordinary Splendour*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Fruit-Gathering*, 44.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 77.



theism shows, a theism so much more definite than ordinary Christian theism that it is the harder to reconcile with the pantheism which is the breath of Hinduism and which appears so abundantly in his work. But he is poet, not theologian, and this passionate individualism of his religion, the very heart of his poetic utterance, is his most characteristic contribution on this side. We may be sure this is what he feels and lives by, however passages in prose lectures may seem to contradict. In No. 22<sup>1</sup> he expresses this by the boldest and strangest, yet most natural metaphor in the world :

When the child leaves the womb it sees its mother. When Thy affection covers me, I lie hidden in its entrails, and then I know Thee not. When Thou dost with violence thrust me far from Thy shelter, in that separation I find consciousness, I see Thy face.

In no book is there richer reminiscence of lives dimly living at the roots of what is too vague to be called memory. As he puts it, 'the dense crowd of what I have not seen surrounds what I have seen'. Or again, 'there is a looker-on who sits behind my eyes';<sup>2</sup> a very free rendering of the Bengali, which says 'In the corner of my heart, at the window of my eyes, thou art gazing in the dawnlight'.

But the texture of *Balākā* is variegated. The Englishman finds in its pages a (not very illuminating) tribute to Shakespeare, from this unlikelyst of admirers :

When you arose beyond the distant sea,  
And England drew you to her breast, then she,  
O Universal Poet, for her own  
Believed you—held you hers, and hers alone !  
A space she kept you, kissing your bright brows,  
Hid in the tangle of her forest boughs,  
Screened with her skirts of fog, within the court  
Whither the elvish tribes for play resort,  
With dewy grass and full-blown wildwood flowers  
Made bright ! Not yet the island's silvan bowers  
Had wakened to your praise, O Poet-Sun !  
But, while the ages in calm sequence run,  
You, at the signal of Eternity

<sup>1</sup> *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Lover's Gift*, 39.

Leaving the horizon's lap, by slow degree  
Have mounted to the noon's bright-blazing height,  
Have taken, filling the world's heart with light,  
Your seat i' the centre ! At the ages' end,  
Lo, now beside the Indian sea ascend,  
Where fronded coco-palms sway to the breeze,  
Your praises, crowning the full centuries !

Here is an exquisite image and close observation : ' From a floating cloud suddenly on the river's flow there is the silent walking of a shadow.' One of the loveliest poems, 25, shows how richly he takes the passing of youth, this man whose youth has been so abounding and so blest with good things. The whole lyric is a jet of beauty, from his showering opulence :

Spring that in my court-yard used to make  
Such riot once, and buzzing laughter lift,  
With heaped drift—  
Pomegranate-flowers,  
*Kānchan*, *pārul*, rain of *palās*-showers ;  
Who with new twigs stirred the woods awake,  
With rosy kisses<sup>1</sup> maddened all the sky ;—  
Seeks me out today with soundless feet,  
Where I sit alone. Her steadfast gaze  
Goes out to where the fields and heavens meet ;  
Beside my silent cottage, silently  
She looks and sees the greenness swoon and die  
Into the azure haze.

36<sup>2</sup> is one of his rare mountain poems, and the unfamiliar scenery heightens its striking freshness. Its opening is superb, and the stanzas which succeed bring out with frosty clearness a noble Himalayan picture :

The Jhelum's curving stream, glittering in the evening glow,  
pales with the dark, like a curving scimitar hidden in its sheath.  
On the day's ebb the tides of night come, bringing their star-flowers  
drifting on the black water. Below the dark mountains the ranks  
of deodars stand. I feel as if Creation wished to speak in its dream,  
but cannot find clear utterance, only a confusion of wordless sounds  
murmuring and sighing in the darkness.

<sup>1</sup> The new leaves are red, are the rosy kisses ; also, *palās* and pomegranate both have red blossoms.

<sup>2</sup> *The Fugitive*, III, 29.



This is the eponymous *Balākā* poem. He hears a flight of wild swans, winging their way through the skies, 'mad with the wine of tempest'. That rush of their wings, remembering his land's legends of these hills and the events that had taken place among them, he compares to the noise of an *Apsaras*, a heavenly dancer, 'breaking the meditation of stillness', as those beings had broken the sanctity of saints.

The mountains, plunged in blackness, trembled, the deodar-forest trembled.

This flight of wild lives through the cold skies becomes to the poet the flight of his own and all men's spirits to an unguessed goal, and the message of their sounding wings in the emptiness is :

It is not here, it is elsewhere, is elsewhere, in some other place.

6,<sup>1</sup> a most touching poem, which remembers his wife, adds yet another streak to the variety of this tulip. No poem is richer in superb images and single lines :

The ebb and flow of light and darkness succeed each other in the sea of the sky. On either side of the path walk the companies of flowers in their colours, with soundless steps.

This song of loss, profound in its reflection, ranks with his very greatest poems. The mournful cadence carries the reader into the heart of its thought, in the very first strophe. I have looked and looked at it, but dare not try to translate. But I am not going to let the reader pass on without assuring him that the poet's own English translation is an insult to his original ; in prose, at any rate, it should not have been hard to do better than that.

*Balākā* abounds in single lines too happy to be rendered with any approach to adequacy. 11<sup>2</sup> ends with lines of unsurpassably stormy sound :

O my Terrible One ! Thy forgiveness was in the crashing thunder-flame, in the sunset's writing of ruin, in the tempest of blood-rain, in the sudden clash of collision.

<sup>1</sup> *Lover's Gift*, 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Fruit-Gathering*, 36.

16' gives impressive speech to his confidence of his poems' destiny :

How many unheard words, leaving the homes of the past, whisper in the empty sky ! They seek my words, on the shores where mankind dwell.

It should be added that no poem has a more striking beginning. No less proud and fine is 17, in which he asserts the poet's claim to have part-created the beauty which he praises :

O World ! So long as I did not love thee, thy light did not find all its wealth. The vast sky, with lamp in hand, was gazing at its path through space.

But the greatest poems in *Balākā* attain their rank, not by beauty alone, but by sustained power of abstract thought and imagination. The *Tājmaḥal* poem, of which a truncation is given in the first poem of *Lover's Gift*, is one of these. Its first sixteen lines are represented by three in the English ! The poem shows some signs of having been written out of resolve rather than impulse and its ground-pattern is a magnificent rhetoric. Its first paragraph has what to us seems a bad conceit : 'O Tajmahal, thy white marble is a solitary tear-drop on the cheek of Time !' But it transcends its limitations. These things are relics from his custom of earlier days : they can be forgotten. For the poem is rich with brooding sense of vanished time, and of the greatness of old days. The Mogul Empire always touches his imagination, and we find an atmosphere as eerie and glamorous as that of *Hungry Stones*. His admiration wins from him the greatest tribute he could give, when he calls the Taj the 'Emperor-poet's new *Meghaduta*'. 'The jingling of thy beautiful ones' anklets, in a corner of the broken palace, dying away with the cicadas' cries makes the night-sky weep.' But my English travesties the text. The poem is a full tide of imagery. Its finish is splendid. The forms of beauty remain, forlorn in their perfection ; Life has left them, going its endless way :

<sup>1</sup> *Lover's Gift*, 58.



Today his<sup>1</sup> chariot has gone, at the call of Night, at the song of the stars, towards the lion-gate of dawn.

He never wrote a richer or more decorative poem, and its fame among his countrymen equals that of *Urvasi*. Yet the poem which follows is finer. *The Stream of Being*, as it may fitly be called, is the greatest poem in the book—a magnificent *Psalm of Life*. As this was the genesis of *Balākā*, I quote the poet's account of its composition.

I was in Allahabad, at my nephew's house. I used to have a very quiet time there, in the evening sitting on the terrace. One day, I felt the restfulness of the scene, and everything around me. It was a dark evening, and suddenly there came on me the feeling, there is flowing, rushing all round me—that invisible rush of creation—the stars flecks of foam. I could feel the flow of that dark evening, with all the stars shining; and that current of eternity touched me very deeply. I felt in the heart of it. So I began to write. And when I start writing, one thing leads to the next. That was the beginning of *Balākā*—the sweep of this impalpable and invisible stream.<sup>2</sup>

As these words show, and as the poem shows still more clearly, he had launched his boat on its greatest tide, a movement of weighty reflection, of waves iridescent and bubbling with incessant fancy and imagination. The World-Energy pulses in these lines, which make their way in perfect ease and freedom, the metre responding swiftly to the changing thought within it. It is a picture of the streaming life-process, from whose strength and force come the calm and composure of each individual part. It has no pattern save the consummate one which is dictated by internal necessity. Yet even this stream is not without its flowers; for here is a Muse who knows no deserts.

Blossoms fall continually in showers: jasmine, *chāmpā*, *bakul*, *pārul*, fall in thy path from the platter of thy seasons.

Nor does he forget earthly rivers, though he calls them by heavenly names.

Thy dancing Mandakini, ever-welling, laves the world-life, cleansing it with the bath of death. At length the sky has blossomed in crystal-bright azure!

<sup>1</sup> Shahjahan's.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation.

Yet the unseen and eternal governs his passion for the phenomenal and passing.

No one realizes that in his blood the waves of thy sea dance, the forest-restlessness trembles. This thought fills my mind today, that I have come, from age to age dropping silently from form to form, from life to life. I have come, using up in gift after gift, in song after song, whatever my hand has gained in night and morning.

So we go our ways, drawn

to the great stream, from the tumult of the past which lies behind,  
to the bottomless dark, to the shoreless light !



## PHĀLGUNI. NATIONALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

*Balākā* did not exhaust his lyrical strength. The close of 1915 and the first month of 1916 were a time when he was supremely happy in song-composition, humming for days together, both at Jorasanko and at Bolpur. In 1914, a new and comprehensive edition of his verse and dramas had begun to appear, which took several years for completion. Meanwhile came *Phālguni—The Cycle of Spring*. This is almost an expansion of *Autumn-Festival*, with our friend Thakurdada dwarfed into simply Dada<sup>1</sup> and cast for once in an ignoble part. It was written and acted in January 1916, in the court-yard of the Jorasanko house, to raise funds for the famine raging in the district of Bankura. There was a packed house, of what Jitendralal Banerjee unkindly called

A motor-car audience—plutocratic, cool, indifferent; not intellectual or even critical, but difficult, unresponsive. They had all taken ten-rupee seats, or looked as if they had.<sup>2</sup>

I was one of this unsatisfactory audience and shall recur later to this memorable first night.

*Phālguni* fell short as literature. It is hard to say this, for the mask was very dear to its creator. It came as the climax of a period of supreme spiritual and mental excitement, and it was not unnatural that it should have seemed to the poet that this was the fruit of which the preceding songs had been but the flower. But inspiration was on the ebb, and his mind and nervous system were extremely overtaxed; how overtaxed he himself did not recognize

<sup>1</sup> Elder Brother. *Tbākurdādā* is 'Grandfather'.

<sup>2</sup> *The Bengalee*, 2nd February, 1916.

at the moment. As J. L. Banerjee, with whose criticisms I found myself in substantial agreement, said, 'the conception is thin, and the execution just tolerable'. The mask, his most elaborate essay in this kind, is a spinning-out of a central idea which will not bear such treatment. The poet had committed one of his besetting sins, that of plunging into the full sea of composition with inadequate forethought. His failures, which, though many, in the vast variety and abundance of his work show in comparatively trifling proportion, are generally due to his facility, which induces him to be content with just one promising conception. This may carry him through a song; but a play requires more. *Phālguni*, then, is incoherent and chaotic, and choked with iteration. The poet deprecated a too serious taking of the mask's spiritual significance; but this was a vain disclaimer, for the symbolism is too intrusive and clamant. Take it away, and what remains? Well, something remains; but this residue is not drama.

But if the main plot must be judged adversely, far more decided must be the opinion pronounced against the long prologue. This is of the very quintessence of thinness, a gossamer which no fairies have woven but the spiders of a very dusty room. The king's concern for the two grey hairs which he has discovered is trivial to the point of awakening contempt, and the whole dialogue which is spun round this meagre core of plot is beneath criticism. Flashes of fancy, gleams of wit, there must be and are. But even in execution there has been a relapse to conceits too paltry for examination. The king speaks thus of the two hairs which have moved him to such perturbation:

The joke is not mine but His, Who has got the whole world by the ear and is having His jest.

By such a comparison it is not the universe which shrinks into insignificance, but its Lord. Again, could any metaphor be more squat than this, quite apart from its tremendous theme—the first hint of Death's imminence? 'Death has left his card of invitation behind my ear.' This might have been said by the Merry Monarch who apologized for



'being such an unconscionable time in dying', but not by the terrified and serious craven of *Phālgunī*. So the thin conceits trickle on, till they give us this exquisitely fitting picture of the poet—whose part, that no element of absurdity might be wanting, was taken by Rabindranath himself, and superbly taken :

Let your poet disport himself, jumping about on the topmost branches of his Garden of Poesy.

Poets have compared themselves to many things ; have been in their own conception 'pardlike spirits beautiful and swift', 'loves in desolation masked', 'like Cain or Christ', have been pilgrims, solitary voyageurs, dreamers. It is hard when a poet himself compares them to white-bearded monkeys, such as thief from ripened mango-groves, and leap from branch to branch.

*Phālgunī* might have taken a higher place if that unhappy introductory matter were away. It is rich in single images. And the play is lyrically rich. The festival of song sometimes attains a very pure limpidity, exquisite on the lips of childhood ; for example, in the Prelude of Act IV. Lastly, *Phālgunī* is in a special sense the poet's own manifesto. We might take, as I have no doubt he meant us to do, as the motto of his own method the Watchman's query : 'Is it your custom to answer questions by songs?' Rabindranath's laughing defiance of philosophy is in the passage where the king asks Chandrasekhar if there is any philosophy in the play, to be assured, 'No, none at all, thank goodness'.

It was because the poet put so much intense feeling and conviction into *Phālgunī* that he acted in it so movingly. He *was* his part, the blind poet whose songs were leading men to the new awakening. It was emphatically one of his favourites among his works. It gave him great satisfaction to remember its success in Germany, in his 1921 tour, and, most of all, an incident which showed its deep hold on one reader.

I was so pleased when I had students from Heidelberg and other places. One student after listening stood up and said in broken English, 'Now we heard that an Old Man from the East will come.

I was looking for that Old Man, but what my surprise that the Youth of the East speaks to me'.<sup>1</sup>

The play, when it first appeared, was acted by the Bolpur students and staff and the poet's family. The result was a cast which no other theatre in Bengal could have commanded, of actors who were amateurs but consummate in their art. The poet had composed his own music and arranged the staging and had trained little boys to sing the wild spring lyrics. *Phālgun* he translates as *April*, but *Phālgun* is a month earlier, the Indian Spring which floods the ways with the intoxicating scent of mango-flowers and thrusts high into heaven the splendid cups—bowls, rather—of scarlet *simul*,

Red, red, and startling like a trumpet's sound.<sup>2</sup>

There is a dancing freshness in the blood of man and beast, and the groves rock with the mad laughter of the *kokils*. This season, with its riot of bliss, the poet perfectly staged. The songs were of ravishing beauty, and far more important than the words of the dialogue. There were boys, almost babies, rocking in leafy swings under shining branches, 'bundles of shimmering green' (to use Mr Banerjee's phrase), a score of Ariels incarnate—

Merrily, merrily, shall I live now,  
Under the blossom which hangs on the bough.

The music was said by the critics to be influenced by Western music. This the poet denied. I cannot say and do not care. All I know is, it was wild-wood music, such as the spirit of the bamboo, the spirit of the south wind, the spirits of the flowers, might sing, if they took human voice, a pulsing treble unspoiled by the least touch of self-consciousness in the singers. Who could wish to criticize, after hearing this? Who could wish to criticize, after seeing the joy-intoxicated dance of the revellers later, singing '*Āmāder khepie' berai*' ('It makes us wander mad')? There was one incongruous figure among them, a Tibetan student, most joyously out of place, with his

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> Toru Dutt, *Baugmarée*.



Mongolian features and his greater age and size, in that festival of childhood. No one who saw him will forget his abandonment of pleasure, as he cracked his thumbs and shouted '*Āmāder khepie' berai*'. The part of the king was played by Gaganendranath Tagore, the poet's nephew, with great dignity and effectiveness. He was always selected for the 'king' parts in his uncle's plays,

by merit raised  
To that bad eminence.

His brother, Abanindranath, the well-known painter, had a more difficult role. *Pandits* appear in Rabindranath's plays as clergymen do in Shakespeare's or bishops in Matthew Arnold's theological polemic. You always know that they are going to be uncommonly foolish, and,

whilst exercising their extraordinary powers, only beating the air, or, in plainer words, busily engaged in talking nonsense.<sup>1</sup>

The war between him and *pandits* was of long standing, and, while they built up the prejudice against him in academic circles, the wounds inflicted by his lighter weapons will last past healing. The part of Srutibhushan the *pandit*, with all its pompous greed, was magnificently rendered by Abanindranath. But the star performance of the evening was Rabindranath's own rendering of the double parts, of Chandrasekhar and, later, in the mask proper, of Baul the blind bard.

Mr Banerjee complains that 'the motor-car audience' was cold and *blasé*; I can only say that this was not perceptible to me. They were not as demonstrative as a Bengali audience generally is; but the lyric feast and the acting would have carried through a worse piece, and, as it was, deeply stirred all who saw. The play ended with an unrehearsed dance by all the actors, as Bottom's interlude closed with a bergomask. One thing which had made the play so charming was the unaffected friendliness together of the cast. Mr Willie Pearson, who was an ambassador and had nothing to do but to salaam Gaganendranath Tagore

<sup>1</sup> A. Birrell, *Obiter Dicta: Matthew Arnold*.

and speak two words of respectful greeting, was garlanded by Rabindranath during the drama, for no reason but affection. In the final general disportment, to the glee of the 'motor-car audience' he pranced arm-in-arm with Ajitkumar Chakravarti. '*Dekho, sāheb nāch karchhe*' ('See, the *sāheb* is dancing'). The revelry continued, long after the play was finished, behind the scenes, where I found the poet exhausted but happy.

I saw him next day, when he was to return with me to Bankura. But his nervous energy was drained. When the mood held him, he had daemonic vigour; but it ebbed suddenly and completely. Press-notices had begun, and he was discouraged by the play's mixed reception; two days after, he was on the edge of collapse. He cancelled his arrangements, and fled from Calcutta to the wild ducks and reedbeds of Shileida, where he rested. But he could never remain absolutely quiescent; and now from time to time he blazed out, with an expenditure of nervous energy and of peace of mind which he could not spare. He wrote *Strir-Patra—A Woman's Letter*—from Puri, a bitter letter voicing a woman's social wrongs. The supposed writer has left her husband's house, disgusted because he married a young girl who was their ward to a lunatic. The letter was Rabindranath's protest against the ignoring of woman's rights and interests, and the contemptuous refusal to look at her point of view. A leading patriot replied with a sequel in which he had no difficulty in showing what a very bad woman this discontented one was. A woman's place is her home, of which she is such a beautiful ornament, so long as she looks after husband and children and leaves all 'business' to wiser heads. Then Rabindranath made one of his fiercest incursions into politics, by articles on the once notorious Presidency College assault.\*

The bias of his mind was turning against the West. It had been doing so ever since the outbreak of war. To him the War was a matter of such appalling horror that in it he could see nothing but proof, flaming heaven-high, of the

\* Led by Sutharchandra Bose.



seething and bottomless iniquity of Western nations. Not the least trouble was that he had been working far too hard. I remember him taking an important Brahmo meeting in January 1916. The Jorasanko house was packed to the side-rooms and verandas; he sat in the far midst, absorbed in meditation, a rapt praying figure, the mind giving out from all its depths and powers. The same month, he wrote *The Home and the World*, at fever-haste, immediately after *Phālguni*. This is essentially a psychological and introspective novel, for it is not to be supposed that ordinary folk would understand and portray themselves as accurately as they do here. The scheme of *The Ring and the Book* is adapted; English literature served him well again, in setting his mind working to such result. Following on such a songtide and on *Phālguni*, the book is a great proof of the vigour of his inspiration. Nikhil and his master are excellently conceived characters. In Amulya, that 'piece of childhood thrown away', we see what sacrifices were demanded by the cruel deity of racial hatred. Bimala, the superficially attractive, yet deeply commonplace woman, is less clearly drawn. Yet she is human; neither for her, nor even for the base self-worshipping Sandip, do we lose all sympathy. The novel would always keep a niche, if only for its historical interest, as the best picture of Bengal's time of political awakening. But its human interest and its literary merit have never won due recognition, and should keep it alive more surely. One passage, where Nikhil's mind travels back in reminiscence to all that his brother's wife had been to him, is a wistful turning back of memory to Rabindranath's own loss in early manhood, and the kindness of a sister-in-law.

The novel was more modern in tone than anything which Bengali fiction possessed. It was much attacked, first, as immoral; secondly, as unpatriotic.

After all this effort, in such varied kinds, his mind was ready to snap. Angry tongues had wagged over *Phālguni*, over *The Home and the World*, over the Presidency College episode. Friendships were strained, and in some cases the trouble was to leave its trace for many a day. It is too

ridiculous to remember now some of the things that were being said. There was bitterness all round. The poet's mind turned longingly to thoughts of deserting the world, and turning *sannyāsi*. Instead, in the summer of 1916, he went to Japan, writing *Stray Birds* on the way ; part of this is translated from *Kanikā*. It may have been the dainty Japanese forms of verse that turned his mind to his own efforts in a kind so similar. He published, in *Pravāsi*, *A Pilgrim to Japan*, which was re-issued in book form in 1919. On the boat, as well as writing *Stray Birds* and his *Pilgrim* diary, he translated *Nature's Revenge*, *Sacrifice*, *King and Queen*, and *Mālini*. He was an extraordinarily rapid worker ; but this record must be considered remarkable. He did the translations all in one week.

From Japan, he went on to the United States. In both countries, he delivered his striking lectures on *Nationalism*. He lectured in America on *Personality* also. His *Nationalism* lectures suffer from the monotonous iteration of one strain, and some unfairness. In the War, as has been already said, he could see nothing but the greed and materialism of the West flaring to well-deserved ruin. This is not an adequate account of one of the greatest controversies of all time, in which the flower of European youth perished, many of them hating all hatred, scorning all cruelty, yet seeing no salvation for their kind but by their death. Rabindranath dedicates the English version of *Sacrifice* to 'those heroes who bravely stood for peace when human sacrifice was claimed for the Goddess of War' ; nor would one deny the conscience and courage of some who refused to touch even the hem of the national effort against the Central Powers. Yet those of us who were closer to the conflict than the Indian poet know in what squalid company his 'heroes' often found themselves ; and we remember other heroes, as brave and gentle and thoughtful as any whom time has seen or shall see. Rabindranath would have helped more had he recognized that blame is not necessarily equally distributed. Also, there were events happening daily which called for pity rather than anger and aloof condemnation. Something must be put down



to tension and overstrain, and to irritation engendered thereby. In the dependent state of his beloved country there must have been so much to make an Indian patriot's blood boil that it is perhaps too much to ask of even a great poet that he should have helped civilization and the cause of humanity in their sore need. As he himself says, in one of those flashes of insight which are rarely absent long from even his wordiest disquisitions, 'pessimism is the result of building theories while the mind is suffering'.

*Nationalism* is nevertheless one of his most valuable and significant books, for he had three things to say which matter immensely, and which no other man had seen so clearly or expressed so passionately. First, he pointed out, as he had done in countless other places, that the British Government in India was impersonal, like an engine of torture,

exempt itself  
From aught that it inflicts.

It was efficient, the native governments were inefficient. Nevertheless, through the countless gaps in the machinery of the old governments personality percolated. India has always been a receiver of diverse civilizations, and has repeatedly built them into a new synthesis. Even the Moguls became nationals of India, and lived their life there, enriching it with their blood, their thought, and their art.

Secondly, the poet's indictment of the modern nation is just, and he was perhaps the first to see clearly to what misery the cult of the nation was leading.

Thirdly, in these lectures he emphasizes, with all his old bravery and flame of conviction, the need for radical removal of Indian social injustice, before Indian political freedom can be worth anything. He emphasizes the truth that it was illogical for Indians to clamour for equality of treatment at the hands of more brutal nations, when they had so callously trampled on their own flesh and blood. No man was ever less of a coward. His courage was sometimes almost beyond belief; probably no foreigner ever spoke more frankly to American audiences, as well as to Bengali and English. In later years, when many of his

countrymen felt that India's one necessity was political action, he took an unpopular line and refused to join the non-co-operation movement. Even *Nationalism* was misrepresented in India, as unpatriotic and as a sneering at Indian nationality. This grotesque misrepresentation need not detain us.

His American tour was gratuitously beset by a Bengali whose blatant publication, first in the *Modern Review*, the most widely-read periodical in India, and then in book form, of every detail of the poet's triumphal progress, did dreadful harm. Rabindranath broke the tour off, and fled back, early in 1917, to some chance of sanity. The money earned by lecturing was needed for his beloved school, to which he had devoted everything; but it was dear money, in the loss of peace of mind and in the opening given to detraction. Where he made a mistake was in complaining of the inevitable price his mind had to pay. His scoldings of interviewers grow monotonous.

That silliest of publicists already quoted observes :

Rabindranath shuns publicity; it hurts his finer instincts and sensibilities. He seems to feel the same towards newspaper men as he would towards mosquitoes.

He adds :

He is a vegetarian. He likes ice-cream, and his only drink is water and milk.

He might be talking of a cat. But here is the crowning unkindness. People had thought that *Gitanjali* had been influenced by the Bible.

To this he gave a decisive reply at Chicago last week that will not soon be forgotten. 'The Bible I have never read,' remarked Tagore. 'I tried to read it. The first two books I tried. They were so . . . so . . . violent, I could not. I have heard that the *Psalms* are beautiful. I must read them some day.'

This poet's ancestors wrote two 'violent' books called the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*. But he was never such a milksop; he must have been misreported.

\* But he published an essay on Jesus Christ.



All through this tour his heart was elsewhere.

I shall be born in India again and again. With all her poverty, misery, and wretchedness, I love India best.

There is no prose here. And this true man and true poet within snatched him from his mistake before it had gone too far. He left his tour unfinished, and returned home in 1917, exhausted and disillusioned, a very weary man. His eldest daughter was dying and those who knew the patience and courage with which he faced his private sorrows and his disappointments realized that one of the noblest men that ever lived was rising, as Ruskin and Tolstoi rose, above both misfortune and mistakes. Some day the story will be told; and its telling will wash away all the ruffraff of foolish interviews and still more foolish reporting.

In the autumn of 1918, he tried hard to spread among his own people a wider culture than anything University courses could give, establishing a *Bengali Home University Library*. The scheme failed. The same year his daughter died. When his trusted friends called on the day of bereavement, he made no reference to what had just happened, but talked calmly of indifferent things, so completely had he learned to veil his intensest suffering. The same year, he published *Palātakā*—‘The Runaway’. Memory of the lingering distress through which he had passed has gone into this book, his gentlest and most sympathetic, and finds oblique narration in one poem, *The Deceit*.

*Palātakā*—‘The Runaway’—consists of fifteen pieces, nearly all stories, which show his narrative gift at its very best. Very few are prolix; most are direct straightforward story-telling, with just sufficient admixture of brooding moralization and reflection. The style is simple and extremely colloquial, almost slangy. The verse, though loose, never quite oversteps art’s domain, into the realm of formlessness. ‘I wanted to write in that broken verse.’ Ornament is austere used. The poetry is in the texture of the stories themselves, or flashes out in a pregnant sentence or two.

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

Two of his greatest gifts are seen almost pure. First, his profound sympathy with Nature and all the dim stirrings of her mysterious life, 'the Great Mother mixing all our bloods'.<sup>1</sup> The eponymous poem<sup>2</sup> is a particularly fine example of this. In his garden are two pets, a dog and a black buck, who play together. One spring, some call beyond human guessing makes the wild creature restless for the vast distant plains where its free companions live the life it has never known; and it goes, never to return. The unknown has conquered the known:

The Dark sent out a call—  
The Light no longer kept in thrall.

The story is told briefly, yet without being cramped. The metre is straying, yet more restrained and with variation within a narrower compass than the flowing movements of *Balākā*. The thought is very fresh and subtle. He gets his atmosphere, his scene of crisp rustling leaves and new spring intoxication, with a line or two. He *understands*; he who has borne so much, till at last his thought and mind are free from all bondage to earth, sits apart as spectator, yet sympathizing with the call of instinct and the wild things' excitement.

The second gift, his tender sympathy with suffering, comes even more closely home to us. Most of these poems deal with wronged lives. He himself had been lifted 'above the battle', the struggle with scorn and penury and famine; yet he knows, and has the most living compassion. *The Dark Girl* brings two tragedies of humble life together. The unwanted daughter for whom no husband can be found<sup>3</sup> sits brooding at the broken window of her poverty-stricken house, despised and disgraced; in the house opposite is a students' mess where a young man lives who cannot pass his examinations nor find employment. His dreams have ended in this, that by the drudgery of private tuition he can get half a meal a day:

<sup>1</sup> T. E. Brown, *Lynton Perseus*.

<sup>2</sup> *Fugitive*, III, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Because of her complexion.



Fate, in pitiless sport,  
 To dance in a starling's cage a peacock made !  
 At every step it jars  
 And dashes its tail on the bars.  
 O drama by some miser made !  
 Where are the spreading forests ? Where  
 The clouds' loud drums  
 That the maddened cyclone strums ?

The young man falls in love with her—no, not love ; only a sentimental dreaminess. He remembers fluting in younger days with the cowherds of his village home ; and he takes up his flute again, and in its wail sends his loneliness and failure across to the girl. Nothing else happens. The hero is not the full-blooded youth of happier lands or circumstances ; he is half-fed. The piece is rich in flashes, of the momentary kind characteristic of *Palātakā*—the girl, compulsorily useless,

Like an idle boat moored to the *ghāt* of a dried-up stream ;  
 the emancipation that music brings to the crushed boy :  
 The walls oppressing on every side, that flute my open window.

*The Eternal Mask* opens with a lovely strain :

From the Beyond to the Here, in his bark  
 Fate the ferryman brings  
 Boys and girls,  
 Like *chāmpā* buds, with tight-shut whorls,  
 Crowding a basket—all are one.  
 But, afterwards, in the dark  
 He takes, in different houses leaving.  
 Then for them new lots are weaving ;  
 In sorrows and joys their days  
 And moments diversely run.

Follows again the tale of that terrible misfortune, an unwanted daughter. Her mother felt shame at her birth ; and as for her father, that worthy man's experience was

As if, when a farmer looked for rain, instead  
 Stones showered on his head.

She was despised and abused, a drudge, a nuisance; only the story's teller was her friend. When they played together, he would ask her name; laughing, she would answer, '*My name is That Naughty One, That Utter Misfortune*'. To his question 'And what am I to you, sister?' she would say, 'Elder Brother, you are my bridegroom'. As her father lets out to him, after her death, the one way in which she could be crushed when all other punishment failed was by forbidding her visits to him. When the time came, with difficulty a bridegroom for her was found in Rangoon. Still a mere baby in years, she made her friend promise solemnly three times, that he would visit her in her new home: 'I will go, sister, will go, surely go!' The ship sinks outside the Irawadi's mouth. 'Fate the ferryman took Saila again, alas! and to what unknown land?' Then, one day her father brings to the dead girl's friend the only relic of her life—a meaningless scribble in an old account-book of his. It was when he had discovered this scribble that in his extreme exasperation he first thought of the punishment of breaking off her visits to her friend. She had brooded rebelliously, silent: but on the twelfth day, pride broke, and she had sobbed, 'I will never be so naughty again!'

Vanished the time when those accounts were cast!<sup>1</sup>

That naughty one has gone, her punishment is past.

This is sole store,

To stay for evermore,

A childish scabble on my heart's core.

*Freedom* is a kind of inverted *May-Queen*—the speaker a dying woman, whom everyone has praised for being such a perfect embodiment of meek crushed wifeliness. She is thirty-one, prematurely worn out, having come to the house as a bride of nine years. All the pent-up mutiny of those ghastly twenty-two years now wells up. She will take no more medicines, and has done with doctor's orders. Let the windows be open, that at last she may taste something of the freedom that has been refused in life!

<sup>1</sup> Added up.



I never heard in word of man  
 A note that sounded on the Eternal's lute.  
 Only I knew that after cooking came  
 Eating, then cooking followed just the same.  
 For two-and-twenty years to one wheel bound,  
 My life went round . . . and round . . . and round.  
 I think that wheel—O drop the matter ! drop it !  
 But why more medicine ?

Spring has come to her life for the first time :

At the open window I gaze at the skies.  
 Moment by moment, with joy my heart is springing.  
 I am a woman, I am a queen ;  
 And on its harp of moonlight the sleepless moon  
 With this tune of mine weaves its tune.  
 Vainly, but for me, would the stars of evening rise !  
 Vainly, but for me, buds bloom in forests green !

Her husband had regarded her little. She cooked, and  
 kept house :

You came from office ; eve by eve,  
 You went to chess—never mind !  
 Oh, throw it all behind !  
 Ah, why today should rankle each small wrong ?

She is celebrating her true nuptials now :

Now, at last, first sounds my wedding flute  
 For marriage with the universal sky !  
 My wretched two-and-twenty years—those nothings !—  
 Down in some dusty corner let them lie !

Open, open the door !  
 And from these wasted two-and-twenty years  
 Bear me afar, over the seas of time !

*The Deceit* tells of a man who took his dying wife for a change of air. They had been shut in the glaring publicity of a joint family, and this journey is a honeymoon to them ; to the wife, who has never since marriage been outside her father-in-law's house, every moment is ecstasy. Her gladness is afterwards her husband's dearest memory. She

showers money on beggars; and at an up-country station picks up an acquaintance with a coolie's wife, who has a plausible story and wants twenty-five rupees. Her husband promises to give the money, then draws the girl aside, and threatens to get her into trouble for begging from passengers. She weeps and begs pardon, so he gives her two rupees. His wife dies shortly after, filled with gratitude for the last perfect two months. But it preys on his mind that he has deceived her. He returns to the wayside station and enquires for the coolie-girl, his questions meeting with impatience and amusement. The family has gone, and no one cares about such folk; the opportunity is gone for ever—a frequent theme with Rabindranath.

*Bholā* tells of a boy's death :

Suddenly it was as though  
 On Siva's matted tresses  
 Ganges ceased to flow ;  
 Ceased her laughter-swelling speech ;  
 Ceased her dancing anklets' ringing ;—  
 Foam and sunlight's white caresses,  
 Wave with wind aswining—  
 In a moment all stopped dead.

Father and son had been madcap friends together, rebels to the mother's commands, shocking their graver neighbours. Now 'Othello's occupation's gone'. But one day the disconsolate father is startled by a vision; the image of his boy stands before him. 'Who are you?' he asks. 'I am Bhola', comes the reply. *Bholā* is a common name, meaning *forgetting*; *Bholānāth*, the full name, is a name of Siva, 'The Lord of Forgetfulness'. When Bhola—a real boy, flesh and blood—requests that his kite be disentangled from a tamarind, instantly the bereaved father remembers how often he had obeyed a thousand commands of another imperious child. The old days return; again ink is spilt on his accounts, and his books and papers are torn. The first appearance of Bhola to the brooding man is startlingly beautiful.

*Palātakā* could not have been written by any but a great poet. The ease and freedom are extraordinary, slang losing



its slanginess and sliding into poetry. *Getting Lost*, perhaps the most popular piece, may be cited as an example of this ease of handling :

My little maid,  
Hearing the call of her companions, went  
Timidly in the darkness down the stair;  
With outspread skirt, each step of the descent,  
Shielding her lamp, warily and afraid.

I was upon the roof, in a star-filled night  
Of *Chaitra*. Suddenly  
I heard the wailing of her voice, and so  
Ran down to see. And there,  
In midway of the stair  
The wind had doused her light.  
'Why, what has happened, Bami ?' I asked. Then she,  
Weeping, 'I am lost', sobbed answer from below.

So, on a star-filled night of *Chaitra*, oft  
I from my roof aloft  
Gaze, and I think that like my little maid  
A Maid walks there, in azure robes arrayed.  
Alone she walks, shielding her lamp with care . . .  
Ah, if that light went out, if there should rise  
A cry 'I am lost !' If in her wandering there  
Wailing she stood, while weeping filled the skies !

*BOOK V*

1919-1941

INTERNATIONALISM





## *AFTER THE WAR*

IN 1919 came the Punjab rioting, and its suppression. Rabindranath wrote to Lord Chelmsford, renouncing his knighthood :

YOUR EXCELLENCY,

The enormity of the measures taken by the Government in the Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India. The disproportionate severity of the punishments inflicted upon the unfortunate people and the methods of carrying them out, we are convinced, are without parallel in the history of civilized governments, barring some conspicuous exceptions, recent and remote. Considering that such treatment has been meted out to a population, disarmed and resourceless, by a power which has the most terribly efficient organization for destruction of human lives, we must strongly assert that it can claim no political expediency, far less moral justification. The accounts of the insults and sufferings undergone by our brothers in the Punjab have trickled through the gagged silence, reaching every corner of India, and the universal agony of indignation roused in the hearts of our people has been ignored by our rulers—possibly congratulating themselves for imparting what they imagine as salutary lessons. This callousness has been praised by most of the Anglo-Indian papers, which have in some cases gone to the brutal length of making fun of our sufferings, without receiving the least check from the same authority, relentlessly careful in smothering every cry of pain and expression of judgement from the organs representing the sufferers. Knowing that our appeals have been in vain and that the passion of vengeance is blinding the noble vision of statesmanship in our Government, which could so easily afford to be magnanimous, as befitting its physical strength and moral tradition, the very least that I can do for my country is to take all consequences upon myself in giving voice to the protest of the millions of my countrymen, surprised into a dumb anguish of terror. The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation, and I for



my part wish to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen who, for their so-called insignificance, are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings. And these are the reasons which have painfully compelled me to ask Your Excellency, with due deference and regret, to relieve me of my title of knighthood which I had the honour to accept from His Majesty the King at the hands of your predecessor, for whose nobleness of heart I still entertain great admiration.

Yours faithfully,

RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

He had never wished for the knighthood, but the pain of having to repudiate what he knew had been meant as recognition and an honour was very acute. Still more acute was the pain of disillusionment caused by the Punjab happenings. He had always believed in an essential fairness in the British character, by which the political dominance of the British Empire had been more endurable than that of other Empires, in spite of much unimaginativeness and disposition to rest on routine. He had many friends among the British, and owed much to their writers. A tired and unhappy man, he felt the world going wrong all about him.

Punjab affairs monopolized public attention, and Rabindranath spoke about them in different places. The most extreme bitterness sprang into being, on both sides. Yet even when tension was at its worst, Rabindranath could write like this :

I am glad to be in England again. One of the first men whom I happened to meet here was H. W. Nevinson ; I felt that man's soul was alive in this country, which had produced such a man as that !

A land should be judged by its best products, and I have no hesitation in saying that the best Englishmen are the best specimens of humanity in the world.

With all our grievances against the English nation, I cannot help loving your country, which has given me some of my dearest friends. I am intensely glad of this fact, for it is hateful to hate. Just as a general tries, for his tactics, to attract a whole army into a *cul-de-sac*, in order to demolish them, our feeling of anger generalizes the whole people of a country, in order mentally to give them a crushing blow on a tremendously big scale. . . .

The fact is that the best people in all countries find their affinity with one another. The fuel displays its differences, but the fire is one. When the fire comes before my vision in this country I recognize it as the same thing which lights our path in India and illuminates our house. Let us seek that fire and know that wherever the spirit of separation is supreme there reigns darkness. . . . You yourself are a bearer of a lamp from your own land, and let me in response light my own lamp with love for the great humanity revealed in your country.<sup>1</sup>

Indians are a magnanimous people—if I were asked what I regard as their great outstanding virtue I should say it is magnanimity. But even among Indians Tagore was exceptional in his generosity of judgement.

But the mischief had been done. The Khilafat agitation was exploited, along with this genuine and dreadful grievance, and the non-co-operation movement came into being. The elections for the new councils were boycotted by the extreme nationalists, so that Indian self-government had a very unfortunate inauguration. Rabindranath, while setting no store by the new councils and other measures of self-government, refused to countenance the non-co-operation movement. Very great pressure was put upon him, and indignation was expressed at his attitude. I was told at the time that Mr C. R. Das used to close each busy day with a full-dress commination of Rabindranath, an exposition of the text, *Gott strafe Tagore*. His annoyance was not without excuse :

*Si Lyra<sup>2</sup> non lyrasset,  
Lutherus non saltasset.*

But for Rabi's flute a-playing,  
Gandhi had not gone a-maying.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Tagore now opposed what to many seemed the logical fulfilment of his teaching.

<sup>1</sup> *Letters to a Friend*, 152. He is writing to C. F. Andrews, 10 April, 1921.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolaus de Lyra, whose commentary on the Bible was published at Nuremberg in 1471. As William Canton translated these lines: 'But for Lyra's lyreing, Luther had not danced his fling'.

<sup>3</sup> Or, at any rate, the Bengali non-co-operators.



Non-co-operators did not understand his point of view—that to him, as to Mr Gandhi, all use of force (and non-co-operation, as practised, was far from ‘non-violent’) was wrong; and that, further, he realized the greatness of the contribution the West had made in things of the spirit no less than of mechanics, and had never had any sympathy with the wish to shut India out from the community of thought and progress. The point deserves further emphasis, in these days when our new popes are dividing the mind’s Americas—materialistic deftness to the West, spiritual greatness to India. Rabindranath repeatedly insisted that even the West’s conquest of material forces has been essentially a spiritual achievement, however perverted to brutal ends, and that his countrymen will impoverish themselves if they neglect it. Nor did he forget the record of intellectual and spiritual achievement that lay between Homer and Joseph Conrad, nor Europe’s martyrdoms, as many as the sands of the sea. Justice is more than generosity, and truth greater than kindness; and one day justice and truth will thrust out these contemptible makeshifts, from us to India and from India to us. East and West, Tagore says, again and again, need each other. The ‘Aryan’ brag is as silly as the ‘British’ one, and proceeds from brains of similar calibre.

Early in 1922, a Gujarati poet addressing an open letter to him about his political attitude, Rabindranath followed up his lectures against non-co-operation with a printed statement of his position. The reader may be glad to have it here; and he may feel that nothing saner or more admirable in conciseness and avoidance of non-essentials has been said by anyone, on the question of Mr Gandhi’s teaching:

I believe in the efficacy of *ahimsa*<sup>1</sup> as the means of overcoming the congregated might of physical force on which the political powers in all countries mainly rest. But like every other moral principle *ahimsa* has to spring from the depth of mind and it must not be forced upon man from some outside appeal of urgent need. The great personalities of the world have preached love, forgiveness and

<sup>1</sup> Non-violence.

non-violence, primarily for the sake of spiritual perfection and not for the attainment of some immediate success in politics or similar departments of life. They were aware of the difficulty of their teaching being realized within a fixed period of time in a sudden and wholesale manner by men whose previous course of life had chiefly pursued the path of self. No doubt, through a strong compulsion of desire for some external result, men are capable of repressing their habitual inclinations for a limited time; but when it concerns an immense multitude of men of different traditions and stages of culture, and when the object for which such repression is exercised needs a prolonged period of struggle, complex in character, I cannot think it possible of attainment. The conditions to which you refer as prevailing in South Africa and those in India are not nearly the same, and fully knowing the limitation of my powers I restrict myself to what I consider as my own vocation, never venturing to deal with blind forces which I do not know how to control.

All this suffering of mind, all this public speaking, killed his poetry. In April 1920, I asked him if he had ever known a period of deadness in poetry. 'I am passing through it now', he replied. Shortly after, he went to England, where he did not have a happy time. People resented things he had said about the War, and thought he had an inadequate conception of what we had suffered.

Lately I went to visit some battlefields of France which had been devastated by war. The awful calm of desolation, which still bore wrinkles of pain—death-struggles stiffened into ugly ridges—brought before my mind the vision of a huge demon, which had no shape, no meaning, yet had two arms that could strike and break and tear, a gaping mouth that could devour, and bulging brains that could conspire and plan. It was a purpose, which had a living body, but no complete humanity to temper it. Because it was passion—belonging to life, and yet not having the wholeness of life—it was the most terrible of life's enemies.

This passage occurs in *Creative Unity*,<sup>1</sup> published in 1922, one of the wisest books he ever published, far-sighted and gracious. But it was first spoken and telegraphed over the world, causing deep indignation. That picturesque 'demon' did his reputation more harm than a hundred

<sup>1</sup> Pp. 96, 97.



high-minded passages of fair speaking have done good.

Also, people were weary of the sameness of the translated work that had been put before them. No reputation which was in reality so well founded ever suffered so greatly.

I think this was largely the poet's fault. His translations are to me a veilation—a cloud between his poetry and the Western public. As he wrote to me, 2nd February, 1921 :

You know I began to pay court to your language when I was fifty. It was pretty late for me ever to hope to win her heart. Occasional gifts of favour do not delude me with false hopes. Not being a degree-holder of any of our universities I know my limitations—and I fear to rush into the field reserved for angels to tread. In my translations I timidly avoid all difficulties, which has the effect of making them smooth and thin. . . . When I began this career of falsifying my own coins I did it in play. Now I am becoming frightened of its enormity and am willing to make a confession of my misdeeds and withdraw into my original vocation as a mere Bengali poet. I hope it is not yet too late to make reparation. . . .

And again, 5th August, 1921 :

You are right in your diagnosis. I become acutely conscious of cracks and gaps in my translations and try to cover them up with some pretty designs that may give them an appearance of wholeness. The moral is, I should never have handled your language. However, as you are willing we shall try to do some reparation before it is too late.

After a brief stay in England, he crossed to France, where he found an enthusiastic welcome. He went on to America, where his reputation had suffered even more than in England, people having passed from extravagant homage to disregard. Then, in 1921, he visited Denmark, Sweden, and Germany, in all of which countries, as later in France, he was received with almost incredible honour. His lecture-rooms were crammed and his plays were received with wild applause. Generous gifts of whole libraries were made to Santiniketan ; European Governments made him their guest, and put aeroplanes at his disposal ; at Copenhagen there was a torchlight procession

of students in his honour. German publishers made purchases of paper which contemplated a sale of three million copies of his books; and they sold scores of thousands of *The Home and the World* and (the English) *Sadbana*, in translations. By all this, he was deeply impressed, and his gratitude remained. Most of all he was touched by the homage of Germany; like most Indians, he had the greatest admiration for the German intellect. Admiration is often part gratitude, and Germans have done much for Sanskrit scholarship. The poet, when depressed by his lost vogue, took refuge in the thought of the rehabilitation that would come from German scholars.

They are a very patient, hardworking race. I know they will take trouble. Some of them are going to learn Bengali, so they will read my works in the original.'

English services to Indian scholarship were easily overlooked in the daily exasperation caused by the political situation. The position was not natural; we were not guests in their country. One day possibly, an Indian poet, writing exultant letters from the midst of a superb European success, will say something worthier of himself than this patronizing summary :<sup>1</sup>

Our modern schoolmasters are Englishmen; and they, of all the Western nations, are the least susceptible to ideas. They are good, honest and reliable, but they have vigorous excess of animal spirits, which seek for exercise in racing, fox-hunting, boxing-matches, etc., and they offer stubborn resistance to all contagion of ideas.

Though one understands the superficial truth of this judgement, this is the voice of extreme exasperation; he never before said anything quite like this. His success tired him and he yearned to turn from this adulation to his own home.

You can have no idea what an outbreak of love has followed me and enveloped me everywhere. All the same, my longing is to go back to my own people—to the atmosphere of continual revilement.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> From Darmstadt, 10th June, 1921.

<sup>3</sup> Exasperation again. This is unjust to his own people.



I have lived my life there, done my work there, given my love there, and I must not mind if the harvest of my life has not had its full payment there. The ripening of the harvest itself brings its ample reward for me. And therefore the call comes to me from the field where the sunlight is waiting for me ; where the seasons each in turn are making their inquiries about my home-coming. They know me who all my life have sowed there the seed of my dreams. But the shadows of evening are deepening on my path, and I am tired. I do not want praise or blame from my countrymen. I want to take my rest under the stars.<sup>1</sup>

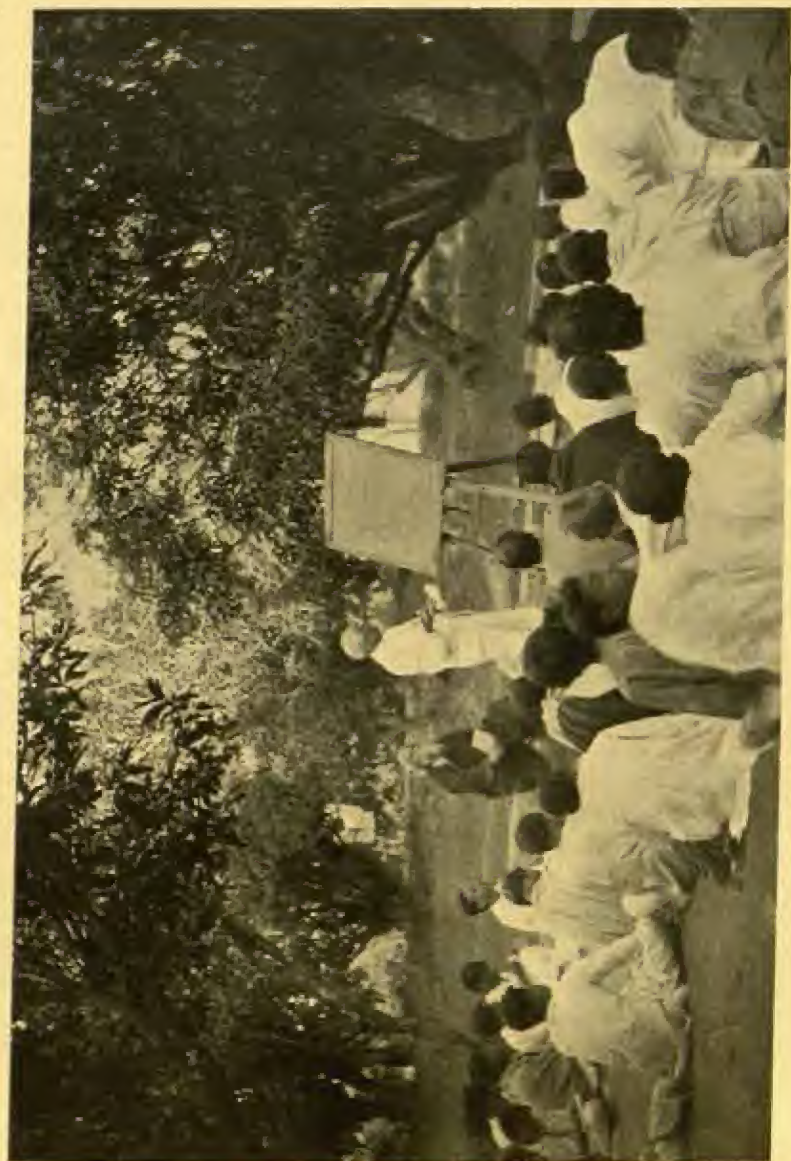
His European success encouraged the poet to formulate his dreams of an Asiatic University at Santiniketan. His plans were pushed forward, and M. Sylvain Lévi left Harvard and joined him for the year of opening. But his return to India was followed by profound depression. Clear thinking is not easy when you are surrounded by a mob of eager young faces ; and away from India he had forgotten the difficulties of the situation. They could not be forgotten when back at Santiniketan. Nevertheless he went ahead, and the *Visva Bhārati*, the World-University of India, was formally opened by Dr Brajendranath Seal on 23rd December, 1921. Among its aims are :—

To study the mind of man in its realization of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view.

To bring together, as a step towards the above object, the various scattered cultures of the East, the fittest place for such endeavour being India, the heart of Asia, into which have flowed the Vedic, Buddhist, Semitic, Zoroastrian, and other cultural currents originating in different parts of the Orient, from Judæa to Japan ; to bring to a realization the fundamental unity of the tendencies of different civilizations of Asia, thereby enabling the East to gain a full consciousness of its own spiritual purpose, the obscuration of which has been the chief obstacle in the way of a true co-operation of East and West, the great achievements of these being mutually complementary and alike necessary for Universal Culture in its completeness.

During 1921, India was restive. Students were on strike as often as not. There were the Moplah troubles, rallying opinion to the side of Government, who had

<sup>1</sup> From Berlin, 28 May 1921.



SANTINIKETAN : M. SYLVAIN LÉVI TEACHING



Speak to me, my friend, of him,  
 and say that he has whispered  
 to thee in the central hush of the storm  
 and in the heart of the peace  
 where life puts on its armour.  
 Say that thy utmost need is of him  
 and that he ever seeketh thy straying  
 heart  
 through tangle of paths.

shown great patience in dealing with the non-co-operators. But those responsible for the transport of the Moplah prisoners of war provided Indians with a 'Black Hole' of their own, by the asphyxiation of over seventy in railway vans. The opposition recovered from their check, and made the Prince of Wales's visit a failure.

Rabindranath resisted all attempts to draw him into politics. Mr Gandhi visited him at Jorasanko, and the two, with C. F. Andrews, talked together. The poet's artist-nephew, Abanindranath Tagore, took in the situation through a keyhole, and produced an interesting picture. Mr Gandhi urged the poet to use the *charkā* for half-an-hour daily. 'I said to him, "Why for only half-an-hour? Why not eight-and-a-half hours if it will help the country?" He said, "For the sake of example".' 'But' (the poet added to me) 'I do not find any of these people using the *charkā* themselves, for all their recommendation of it.' They argued that their own inconsistency did not impugn the truth of their gospel. The argument is not new. To another prominent leader of non-co-operation, he put the question, did he seriously believe that six months' turning of the *charkā* would bring *swarāj*? He was answered, 'I do not believe in anything more than I do in that'. Rabindranath retorted that if somebody came and told him that three days' worship of the feet of a *pāndā*<sup>\*</sup> would get him into Heaven, the worshipping might be a trifle, but he would certainly refuse to enter a heaven so obtained. A *swarāj* won by six months of *charkā*-turning was not worth having: it was too mechanical and simple.

The non-co-operators did not confine their abuse to contemporaries. There was a great campaign of detraction of Rammohan Roy, who was denounced as having introduced this denationalizing Western influence. This was a grief to Rabindranath, who realized Rammohan Roy's greatness and fervent patriotism. This folly of abuse, he held, showed a deep inability to understand universal values,

\* Proprietary priest of a shrine—not a highly respected person.



and betrayed an ingrained narrow-mindedness. Gandhi, contrasting him with Kabir and Nanak, had called Rammohan Roy a 'dwarf'. Taking up this word indignantly, Tagore wrote :

In the time of Ram Mohun Roy the West had come to the East with a shock that caused panic in the heart of India. The natural cry was for exclusion. But this was the cry of fear, the cry of weakness, the cry of the dwarf. Through the great mind of Ram Mohun Roy the true spirit of India asserted itself and accepted the West, not by the rejection of the soul of India, but by the comprehension of the soul of the West. The mantram which gives our spiritual vision its right of entrance into the soul of all things is the mantram of India, the mantram of Peace, of Goodness, of Unity—Santam, Sivam, Advaitam. The distracted mind of the West is knocking at the gate of India for this. And is it to be met there with a hoarse shout of exclusion ?<sup>1</sup>

Rammohan Roy 'could be perfectly natural in his acceptance of the West, only because his education had been perfectly Eastern. . . He was never a schoolboy of the West, and therefore he had the dignity to be a friend of the West. If he is not understood by modern India, this only shows that the pure light of her own truth has been obscured for the moment by the storm-clouds of passion'.<sup>2</sup> He 'was the first great man in our age to feel in his heart the unity of soul between the East and West. I follow him, though he is practically rejected by my countrymen'.<sup>3</sup>

It was not the non-co-operators alone who harassed him. The anti-non-co-operators urged him to support Government more vigorously. On one occasion, platoons of co-operators and of non-co-operators arrived simultaneously, and battled for his body. He slipped out of the room in the thick of the fight.

But he was using time in happier ways than merely escaping politicians. Every day, he was writing poems reminiscent of his childhood. Writing had long been natural to him, and he could produce verse at practically any time. He was now living his childhood over again, with deep joy. He was also experimenting in unrhymed

<sup>1</sup> *Letters to a Friend*, 167.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 165.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 109.

English verse, giving fresh proof of his mind's elasticity. The reader may care to see these experiments, which I believe have not been published elsewhere.

- (1) When the evening steals on western waters,  
Thrills the air with wings of homeless shadows,  
When the sky is crowned with star-gemmed silence  
And the dreams dance on the deep of slumber ;  
When the lilies lose their faith in morning  
And in panic close their hopeless petals,  
There's a bird which leaves its nest in secret,  
Seeks its song in trackless paths of heaven.

- (2) Breezy April, vagrant April,  
Rock me in your swing of music,  
Thrill my branches with enchantment  
At your touch of sweet surprises.  
In my life-dream, by the wayside  
You come, startling me from slumber :  
Wilful in your mood fantastic—  
Courting, teasing, and inconstant.

Breezy April, vagrant April,  
Living with my lonesome shadows,  
I know all your fitful fancies,  
Leafy language, flitting footsteps.  
All my boughs break into blossom  
At your passing breath and whisper ;  
All my leaves break into tumult  
Of surrender at your kisses.

- (3) Once, when we were both together, Spring came to our  
cottage.  
' Let me in ', he cried.  
He had brought for us the whispered secrets of his gladness,  
Lyrics of new leaves.  
I was busy with my fancies, you sat at your spinning ;  
He went back unheeded.  
Suddenly we started when we saw his parting shadow  
And his remnant roses.  
Now you are away, beloved, Spring comes to our cottage.  
' Let me in ', he cries.  
He has brought for me the fitful shiver of the shadows,  
Doves' despondent cooings.



I sit idle at the window, and a phantom spinning  
 Spins to me sad dreams.  
 Now that Spring has for his gift the gift of secret sorrow,  
 All my doors are open.

- (4) Come, my Lover, in thy lavish splendour !  
 Hurt the wind with shock of thy arrival.  
 No more secret meetings in uncertain  
 Gleams of twilight ; let thy burning torches  
 Toss through midnight their tumultuous laughter.  
 Grasp me by my right hand ; rescue me  
 From all trivial ties of clinging moments,  
 Coils of sluggish dreams ; and let all sleepers  
 Wake and come, and see me glad and helpless,  
 Held in might of thy majestic silence.
- (5) As the tender twilight covers in its fold of dust-veil  
 Marks of hurt and wastage from the dusty day's prostration,  
 Even so let my great sorrow for thy loss, Beloved,  
 Spread one perfect golden-tinted silence of its sadness  
 O'er my life. Let all its jagged fractures and distortions  
 And unmeaning scattered scraps and wrecks and random  
 ruins  
 Merge in vastness of some evening stilled with thy remem-  
 brance,  
 Filled with endless harmony of pain and peace united.

This same untiring interest in form showed itself in a series of pieces collected in 1922 as *Lipikā*.<sup>1</sup> One or two of these are almost a naturalizing in Bengali of *vers-libre* ; others are descriptive prose-poetry ; others are allegories and apologues. They are a mixture of subtle thought and extraordinarily close observation and of conceits, sometimes very thin. They show him more and more an observer, detached and intellectual. Old griefs find calm but touching remembrance ; 'what was sorrow once has become peace'.<sup>2</sup> The poems were rapturously received by his admirers, who felt that they added new modes of imaginative expression to their tongue. The unfaltering

<sup>1</sup> An untranslatable word. Say *Letters*.

<sup>2</sup> *Fugitive*, p. 73. For a beautiful commemoration of a still heavier loss, see the same book, no. 24 on pp. 69 and 70.

beauty of phrase and rhythm deserve gratitude and the book is much more than a fine example of his technical skill. Yet the impartial reader will feel that the conclusion of such a piece as that translated on p. 127 of *The Fugitive* is a sledge-hammer emphasis on the trivial; and there are too many such pieces in *Lipikā*. Many of these are translated in *The Fugitive* volume.

In the *Pravāsi* for April 1922, appeared a new play—*Muktādbhārā*—‘The Free Current’—which had been already given to a private audience. Translated as *The Waterfall*, it was printed in the *May Modern Review*. This play is even more of a closet-play than previous ones; but it is attractive reading, and no doubt capable of such restricted success on the stage as his dramas obtain. It is a reasoned though highly allegorical presentation of his convictions, as expressed during many previous years, on modern politics. It has many strands of significance woven into it, so that it is like shot silk suggesting many colours; the play’s achievement is that in it he has attained a synthesis of his different convictions and messages. His deep distrust of all government by machinery and of all prostitution of science to serve violence and oppression, his hatred of a slavish system of education, his scorn of race-hatred and of all politics which seek to make one tribe dependent on another instead of risking the gift of the fullest freedom, his certitude that it is in freedom that God is found—all these are so prominent that each may with justice be claimed as the play’s message. Through all, as a tender undertone, runs the murmur of the Free Current, a haunting sound in the soul of the boy whose foster-mother she was and whose lifeless body, after he has broken her fetters, her waves are to carry majestically away. There are impressive passages, as where the Machine is seen, sinister against the sunset, crouching over the land and its life, overtopping even God’s temple; or where the noise of the breaking dam and the raging waters is first heard. All through the play sounds the menace of God’s gathering anger at the hardness of men’s hearts and the sordidness of their hopes. Finest of all is the



constant quiet drift of folk along the roads, the procession of life. It is the greatest of his symbolical plays.

During the rainy season of 1922, he gave a couple of performances in Calcutta of the *Rains-Welcome*, a festival of songs wonderfully rendering his favourite season. The choir, which included many Brahmo ladies, sang these with great feeling and skill; tunes and training, as well as poetry, were Rabindranath's. During these months and the ones immediately before the Rains, he composed many new songs; and in the fall his re-written *Autumn-Festival* was twice performed in aid of *Visva Bhārati*. Brahmo ladies for the first time appeared on a theatre stage, though as a choir merely. This action was strongly criticized, as it was bound to be. But not by the audience, who saw and heard a very lovely pageant, colour and song and open-air delight; tiers of charming young women attired gracefully in wonderful *sāris*, and in front exquisite little girls and boys from Santiniketan presenting that happiest of dramatic frolics, with the grey-haired poet the gayest of them all.

The three following years (1923-1925) were crowded with work for *Visva Bhārati* and with literary work—songs, masks, essays, anthologies, redactions of his own earlier work.

In the autumn of 1921, I asked him 'Do you expect to have many more years?' He smiled, and replied very quickly, 'Eight. No, seven now. I shall die at 68'. This is what was written in his horoscope. In that case, he had between then and 1929 or 1930, to finish off his life of superb and unhalting energy. He had on occasion shown such freshness of mind and so much ability to make new beginnings, that anything might happen.

I thought that my voyage had come to its end at the last limit of my power. . . . But I find that Thy will knows no end in me. And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> (E.) *Gitanjali*, 37; (B.) *Gītānjali*, 125.

## *LAST YEARS*

THE astrologers, however, were wrong. He entered on a phase of foreign travel, which for variety and importance, no man ever equalled. It was said of Byron that 'he took the English spirit on pilgrimage through Europe'. Rabindranath took the Indian spirit on pilgrimage through the whole civilized world, and in his own person brought that world back to India.

This statement perhaps needs one qualification. Part of his reception was due to a feeling that something of India's greatness had at last got outside the barrier which Great Britain was believed to have placed round that country; our possession of India was resented by other nations to an extent which we have never guessed. But the triumph was assured by Tagore's own superb presence and personality, by his dignity and self-possession. I myself think that he brought more than he took away from the experience—that, resting in the natural pleasure of so unparalleled a welcome, he noticed and learnt less than he would have done in his own younger days, that he gave and did not always receive. But the impression and legend which he left were ineffaceable.

In 1922, he toured Ceylon and South India: in 1923, Sind and the States of Western India: in 1924, China and Japan: later in the year, he accepted the Republic of Peru's invitation to attend the centenary celebrations of its independence, but fell ill at Buenos Aires. In 1925 he spent a brief period in Italy, to which he returned in 1926, to receive from both Mussolini and the people such a welcome as no foreigner before him.

On 10th June, he was present in Rome at the Annual Choral Concert of the school children of the capital:

The huge Coliseum was one seething mass of human faces. The Choir, which consisted of more than one thousand children, was



grouped on a huge wooden gallery. As we entered, the whole audience, numbering perhaps twenty-five to thirty thousand, rose from their seats and gave such a welcome to the poet as we shall never forget. The singing was marvellous, more than a thousand voices singing in harmony. At parting, the audience rose again and saluted in Roman style. The poet was visibly touched and raising his arms blessed the children with all his heart.<sup>1</sup>

All Italy rose to acclaim him. *Chitrāngadā* was played to enthusiastic audiences. When the Rector of the University of Rome presented an Address,

The crowd was so great near the front entrance that the poet and the ladies had to be taken in by a back door. There was a tremendous ovation when the poet stood up on the platform and throughout his speech there were constant bursts of applause and cheers. But the climax of the demonstration was reached when at the request of a student the poet put on the academic cap of the University. The long galleries outside the Hall were filled with students, and a huge crowd was standing in the immense court-yard below to catch a glimpse of the poet as he passed.

The modern totalitarian state has carried propaganda to a pitch of skill previously unknown, and every effort was made, subtly and surreptitiously, to draw Tagore into Fascist service. Perhaps the only major political error of his whole career was that he was in part deceived, though only for a short time. He insisted that 'as a State guest it was difficult for me to come into contact with the general public' and in a farewell press interview at Florence said: 'I am not really competent to judge what the Italians wish and think. I hope they will realize that the mere pursuit of material wealth will never make them great.' But his rather carelessly expressed wish, 'Let me dream that from the fire bath the immortal soul of Italy will come out clothed in quenchless light', was used as the basis of a campaign to show that he was a convert to totalitarian theory and ideals. As an artist 'deeply impressed by the personality of Mussolini', he saw in him: 'an extraordinarily powerful face with a massive head; the lower portion is pleasant, very human and even tender; a

<sup>1</sup> Prasanta Mahalanobis's Notes, printed in the *Tagore Birthday Number*.

kindly smile makes his speech peculiarly attractive and reveals the many contradictions in his character; evidently possesses a genuine love for culture'. Very many English and American men and women were fooled by Mussolini (as, later, by Hitler). Mr Winston Churchill, afterwards the implacable foe of 'that jackal Mussolini', at one time paid an equally glowing tribute, and it would have needed prophetic insight to have foreseen the terrible years in which, after Italian liberty had been crushed, Abyssinia and Spain and Albania were assassinated. At first all that foreigners could perceive was that a new formal efficiency had come to Italy's administration, and a new vigour to her government. Of all who were temporarily deceived, none recovered more quickly and completely than the Indian poet.

His recovery began almost instantaneously. Almost all foreigners in Italy, British and Americans not least, were then admirers of the Fascist régime. But in Switzerland Romain Rolland

was very much disturbed by the reports then being broadcast about the poet's supposed views about Fascism and spoke to him about the seriousness of the whole situation. At the same time the poet was made acquainted with the translations from Italian papers which we had brought from Italy.

Tagore was shaken and distressed. 'Being ignorant of Italian the only precaution I could take was to repeat emphatically to all my listeners that I had no opportunity yet to study the history and character of Fascism. . . . I have said over and over again that the aggressive spirit of Nationalism and Imperialism—religions cultivated by most nations of the West—is a menace to the whole world.' He now obtained first-hand information of what Fascism was doing, from distinguished Italian exiles. With characteristic candour and courage he immediately made his judgement clear, in a letter to the *Manchester Guardian*. As a result, the Government-controlled press of Italy broke into a storm of denunciation.

This same year, 1926, Rabindranath went from Switzerland to Austria, to Norway, Denmark, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Jugoslavia, Rumania, Greece and Egypt.



We have been going from place to place like gipsies. The poet had a nervous breakdown in Prag (owing to too many public and social engagements—there are two different sets in Prag, Czechs and Germans, and everything had to be repeated twice, two lectures, two receptions, attending two performances of *The Post-Office*, two sets of interviews, and so on), which developed into influenza on reaching Wien. Fortunately, he recovered quickly, and, the weather getting better, insisted on coming to Budapest, where he had a wonderful reception. Another nervous breakdown after a round of engagements—finally, doctors advised him to avoid the colder climate of the north and to travel by the eastern route to Egypt. So we decided to go through the Balkans and Greece, and in view of his health I insisted on refusing all engagements. It was no use. Men were coming from the different Legations every day . . . so we went from one place to another, the poet lecturing every day and sometimes morning and evening in the same day. The weather was superb, the driest November in fifty years, and the poet naturally in the highest spirits all the time. We went to Zagreb (Croatia), Belgrade, Sofia and Bucharest. All the different Governments very thoughtfully placed a saloon at our disposal, which made travelling easy and comfortable. There was the greatest enthusiasm everywhere, but I think we found the greatest cordiality in Bulgaria.<sup>1</sup>

Such 'ambassadors of India' in recent years as Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru have seen with intimacy many lands besides Great Britain, and in those lands which we have too easily dismissed as 'backward' have noted the resemblances with their own land which have awakened hope for India in her ignorance and poverty. To Rabindranath the Balkans had

much greater variety than west Europe, and the people are much less sophisticated, and, being less industrialized and therefore more or less agricultural, resemble India in many ways. Music, for example, is peculiarly Indian.

I was frankly astonished to see the amount of interest. . . . In Sofia the day of the poet's arrival was observed as a holiday by the University and all educational institutions, and there was a long—perhaps more than a mile long—triumphal procession. We met a number of most interesting people, and also a small group of very thoughtful men who are thinking very earnestly about the problem of nationalism.

<sup>1</sup> Prasanta Mahalanobis, letter to me, 12 December 1926.

In 1927, Tagore travelled widely in British and native India, presiding over literary conferences, addressing meetings, laying foundation stones. In July, he left India again, for his ninth foreign tour, which took him through Malaya, Java, Bali, Siam. In 1928, he visited Aurobindo Ghose, and toured Ceylon, returning to attend in Calcutta the Brahmo Samaj Centenary celebrations. In January 1929, he received at Santiniketan the Viceroy, Lord Irwin. An invitation from the National Council of Education of Canada, to attend their Triennial Conference, led to his tenth tour. Visiting Tokyo on the way, he lectured at Vancouver, 6th April, and in his address to the Council, on *The Philosophy of Leisure* (but when did this astounding man ever give himself any leisure?), proved 'a terrific figure. There was nothing of mysticism in his address . . . and his dealings were with reality in the realest sense of the word'.<sup>1</sup> He was invited by Harvard and Columbia Universities to lecture in the United States, but lost his passport and in resentment of his treatment by the authorities at Los Angeles, which seemed to him to show racial and not merely personal contempt, cancelled his engagements in protest, and toured Japan and Indo-China. In Calcutta he reappeared as an actor, in *Tapati*, a re-casting of *Rājā O Rāni*.

1930 was a particularly important year, for he took up seriously painting, that new career he discovered for himself when nearing seventy. His artistic work puzzled the critics, but its originality and striking use of colour were plain to all. His eleventh foreign tour began in March, and was a bewildering sequence, through France, Czechoslovakia, England (where at Oxford he delivered his Hibbert Lectures, *The Religion of Man*). He went on to Germany, Denmark and Russia.

His Russian visit proved a revelation, an intense delight whose influence never left him.

In Russia at last! (Whichever way I look, I am filled with wonder.) It is unlike any other country. It is radically different.

<sup>1</sup> Clifford Dowling, the *Daily Province*, a Vancouver paper, 11 April.



From top to bottom they are rousing everybody up without distinction.

Throughout the ages, civilized communities have contained groups of nameless people. They are the majority—the beasts of burden, who have no time to become men. They grow up on the leavings of society's wealth, with the least food, least clothes and least education, and they serve the rest. They toil most, but theirs is the largest measure of indignity. . . . They are like a lampstand bearing the lamp of civilization on their heads; people above receive light while they are smeared with the trickling oil.<sup>1</sup>

He had 'often thought about them, but came to the conclusion that they were beyond the reach of help. If there were no lower classes, how could there be any higher classes? . . . There is need to preserve a corner for leisure in human civilization'. So he used to think that all that could be done was to improve their conditions. Now all this was changed. 'Nothing permanent can be built up on charity. . . . Only from equals can one expect real help.' He was not deceived into imagining that everything in Russia was perfect; he knew well that its government was totalitarian and that tyranny was far from absent. But he saw also that in education the peasants, who in tsarist times were 'as helpless, hungry, oppressed and illiterate as our Indian masses: indeed, in certain respects their misery was even greater, not less, than ours', had progressed so astonishingly in a few years 'that nothing comparable has happened even to our highest classes in the course of the last hundred and fifty years'. Above all, communal and religious distinctions were being brushed aside, alike in education and in local self-government.

Not in European Russia alone, but also among the semi-civilized races of Central Asia, they have opened the flood-gates of education. There is no limit to the effort made to bring the latest fruits of Science to them. The theatres here are crowded to overflowing, but those who come to them are peasants and workers. Nowhere are they humiliated.

<sup>1</sup> Translated from letters written from the Soviet Union now and three years later.

His tour was a prolonged joy, and the common people flocked to meet him. In his farewell address, 24th September, to a vast public meeting in the Central House of Trade Unions, he said: 'The little that I have seen has convinced me of the marvellous progress that has been made, the miracle that has been achieved.' He dreamed of a time when his own 'ancient land of Aryan civilization' would enjoy the same equal education and equal opportunities for all. He was deeply thankful because his experience had made real his own lifelong hope of 'emancipating the people's minds which have been shackled for ages'.

He left Moscow on 25th September, and after a brief stay near Berlin went to the United States. It would be tedious to list the public honours he received in every land: the addresses he gave to rapt audiences, the exhibitions of his paintings. From America he returned to England, then, in January 1931, to India, where he spent the year travelling widely. That was why the celebration of his seventieth birthday had to take place, not on the actual date, but during the Christmas week, seven months later, with addresses, presentation of *The Golden Book of Tagore*, and 'a programme including a comprehensive Exhibition illustrating the significant events and activities of the Poet's varied life'.

At the invitation of the Shah of Persia, he undertook by air in 1932 his twelfth foreign tour. The Government and people of Persia gave him the usual welcomes. He collected fresh homage from King Feisal in Baghdad, and returned to India by air, to be greeted by the University of Calcutta at a special Academic Reception, and to visit Gandhi in Yeravda jail, where the latter was apparently at death's door as a result of his fast on behalf of the Untouchables. 1933 was another year of 'progresses' (almost in the sense of Queen Elizabeth's, among her faithful subjects) throughout India. 1934 took him to Ceylon again, as well as Madras and the Telinga country, where he always took a deep interest in the Andhra University; 1935 to the Punjab and United Provinces; 1936 was another round of visits, through Allahabad, Lahore, Delhi, Hyderabad (Deccan), Meerut, Dacca.



In 1937, he continued these activities, until in September he fell seriously ill. While in Calcutta, convalescing, he was visited by Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and the All-India Congress Committee passed a resolution of thanksgiving for his recovery. In 1938, his health kept him inside Bengal, but in 1939 he was off on his travels again, young and indomitable, and his birthday was 'observed with great solemnity' at Puri, where the Orissa Premier held a reception in his honour. He visited the Himalayas and Midnapur: he saw performances of his plays, he inaugurated literary and social movements, he was the uncrowned Emperor of India, or at any rate Hindu India. In 1939, on his way to China, Jawaharlal Nehru again visited Jorasanko; in 1940, Gandhi visited Santiniketan. His friendship with Nehru, a spirit as emancipated and modern as his own, was peculiarly close and intimate, and in times of discouragement the patriot leader found in Santiniketan a place of rest and release. His only child, Indira, had been a pupil there.

The years had brought many sorrows. His brothers, one by one, had passed away, Satyendranath in December 1922, Jyotirindranath in February 1924, Dwijendranath in January 1926. Willic Pearson had died as the result of a railway accident in Italy, in 1923. Satyendranath Datta, Brajendranath Seal, and how many others had gone. Tagore still lived and was active as well as contemplative. Gandhi named him 'The Great Sentinel'; he had become almost a symbol of India, but of India no longer meditating in her forest *ashram* but watching closely the course of this bewildering modern age. He saw all things, he formed his judgements, he spoke clearly and sharply, sparing in neither East nor West what he felt was wrong.

On 5th April, 1940 C. F. Andrews died, a heavy sorrow. In a memorial service, in the *mandir* at Santiniketan, on the day of this selfless spirit's passing, Rabindranath testified: 'In no one man have I seen such triumph of Christianity. His sacrifice, the complete surrender of self, will ever remain treasured in our hearts.'

Tagore's mind, distressed by the growing estrangement

of Britain and India, had been turning in despair away from the West. Yet even in these last two years of extreme disillusion and bitterness he retained his magnanimity :

My good fortune has brought me into close contact with really great-hearted Englishmen. Without the slightest hesitation I may say that the nobility of their character was without parallel—in no country or community have I come across such greatness of soul.

He was indebted to Andrews personally,

because he helped me to retain in my old age that feeling of respect for the English race with which in the past I was inspired by their literature and which I was about to lose completely. Along with his memory the innate greatness of his people will abide with me for ever. I count such Englishmen as Andrews not only as my personal and intimate friends, but as friends of the whole human race. To have known them has been to me a treasured privilege. They made me believe that English prestige will be saved from every shipwreck if there were more of such Englishmen. Had I not met them, not even the faintest hope would mitigate my despair with regard to the Western nations.<sup>1</sup>

As these words show, his mental distress was now intense. He had seen the triumph of materialism, killing man's soul and shackling his body, of pitiless force in some lands and of complacency, cowardice, and shrinking in others. The state of his own beloved land pained him hardly less. Two years before he died, he told an English visitor that he would welcome even a wave of atheism over India, for it would act like a forest fire that sweeps away dead stuff and rubbish. When I was last in India, in October 1939, after the outbreak of war, he said, and only half in jest, that he was sorry he would not live to see the Soviet Union conquer India, for it was the only Power which would drop a bomb impartially on those two symbolically contiguous buildings, the Moslem mosque and the temple of Jagannath at Puri!

As we have frequently seen, he deplored throughout his life the folly of those who in India not only glorified the

<sup>1</sup> Address delivered at Santiniketan, on his 80th birthday.



past indiscriminatingly, but justified anything they considered Indian, as necessarily superior in quality, however plainly worthless or even evil. These people,

while never neglecting to make proud boast of their country's glory, have an absurdly narrow conception of the ideal in which that glory consists. Their indiscriminate reverence is for the actual, not the eternal. The habits and customs of our decadence, which have set up barriers between us and the world, splitting us into mutually exclusive sections, making us weak and bowing our heads in shame at every turn of our later history—these are the idols of their special worship, which they endow with endless virtues of their own imagining. They consider it to be their sacred mission to retain in perpetuity the waste matter sloughed off by age, as the true insignia of our Hindu civilization; to extol the gleam of the will-o'-the-wisp, born of the noxious miasma of decay, as more time-hallowed than the light of sun, moon and stars.

Up to now we have not been submitting our own scriptures to the same critical, historical and scientific tests,

he says, as obtained in Western scholarship. Everything in India was by tradition ascribed to the act of some deity. Even the things of the mind were a 'wonderland' which had 'been set going, once for all, by the co-operation of gods and sages'. No critic could be allowed to examine 'an arrangement of such perfection. That is why even our educated men do not feel any qualms in counting our miraculous myths as integral parts of our history'.<sup>1</sup> He illustrates his thesis by such details as the necessity of enquiring of *shāstras* and pandits as to the permissibility of a sea-voyage, and by the vagaries of caste, which allow a man to 'handle our milk or our molasses' while he must not come near our drinking water, and which allege that foreign food destroys one's caste 'while foreign strong drink apparently does not'. He saw no future for India unless she ruthlessly looked into custom and belief and fearlessly joined in the search for enlightenment. 'It is an utter lack of reverence for truth which, in the name of patriotism, can ignore the grand quest of man for knowledge because, for the time being, its field of activity

<sup>1</sup> 'The Way to Unity', *The Visva Bhārati Quarterly*, July 1923.

happens to be in the West.' He detested the 'greed for immediate political result' which ignored the obstacles to freedom inside India itself. 'Freedom is not for those who are not lovers of freedom and who only allow it standing place in the porter's vestibule for the sake of some temporary purpose, while worshipping, in the inner shrine of their life, the spirit of blind obedience.'

In 1938, a Japanese poet who had been his guest at Santiniketan wrote and appealed to him to use his name with the Chinese public, to persuade that great nation to accept Japan's chastisement as kind and for their good. Noguchi claimed that Japan's situation in 'the Chinese incident' was unique, 'forgetting that military situations are always unique, and that pious war-lords, convinced of peculiarly individual justification for their atrocities, have never failed to arrange for special alliances with divinity, for annihilation and torture on a large scale'. Tagore knew that for every nation there are two kinds of wrong-doing, its own and those of other nations, that there is a sharp difference between atrocities committed by its own heroes and those committed by its enemies. He took up Japan's justification of her New Order, now styled 'the inevitable means, terrible though it is, for establishing a new great world in the Asiatic continent', 'signifying, I suppose', says Tagore, 'the bombing of Chinese women and children and the desecration of ancient temples and universities as a means of saving China for Asia'. This superb flame of anger seems to me unsurpassed for brightness and fierce ardour,

You are building your conception of an Asia which would be raised on a tower of skulls. I have, as you rightly point out, believed in the message of Asia, but I never dreamt that this message could be identified with deeds which brought exaltation to the heart of Tamer Lane at his terrible efficiency in manslaughter. . . .

I speak with utter sorrow for your people; your letter has hurt me to the depths of my being. I know that one day the disillusionment of your people will be complete, and through laborious centuries they will have to clear the debris of their civilization wrought to ruin by their own war-lords run amok. They will



realize that the aggressive war on China is insignificant as compared to the destruction of the inner spirit of chivalry of Japan which is proceeding with a ferocious<sup>1</sup> severity. . . .

If you can convince the Chinese that your armies are bombing their cities and rendering their women and children homeless beggars—those of them that are not transformed into ‘mutilated mud-fish’, to borrow one of your own phrases—if you can convince these victims that they are only being subjected to a benevolent treatment which will in the end ‘save’ their nation, it will no longer be necessary for you to convince us of your country’s noble intentions. Your righteous indignation against the ‘polluted people’ who are burning their own cities and art-treasures . . . to malign your soldiers, reminds me of Napoleon’s noble wrath when he marched into a deserted Moscow and watched its palaces in flames.

I should have expected from you, who are a poet, at least that much of imagination to feel to what inhuman despair a people must be reduced to willingly burn their own handiwork of years’, indeed centuries’ labour. And, even as a good Nationalist, do you seriously believe that the mountain of bleeding corpses and the wilderness of bombed and burnt cities that is every day widening between your two countries is making it easier for your two peoples to stretch your hands in a clasp of everlasting good will ?

He was suffering intensely ‘because I can no longer point out with pride the example of a great Japan’. It was true there were no better standards elsewhere, and if Noguchi referred him to Western nations ‘I have nothing to say. What I should have liked is to be able to refer them to you. I shall say nothing of my own people, for it is vain to boast until one has succeeded in sustaining one’s principles to the end’. News of the fall of Canton and Hankow moved him to conclude: ‘The cripple, shorn of his power to strike, may collapse, but to be able to ask him to forget the memory of his mutilation as easily as you want me to, I must expect him to be an angel.’ He

<sup>1</sup> This word was a favourite of his. Speaking to me once of Sister Nivedita’s ‘violence’, he added, ‘But there could be no doubt of her devotion to my people. I have seen her, a delicately nurtured lady, living uncomplaining and cheerful in conditions of sheer squalor. And’ (his face brightened) ‘she could be *ferocious* at any wrong or injustice done to my people.’

signed himself, 'Wishing your people, whom I love, not success, but remorse'.

No man (until Mr Winston Churchill in the second World War), in any country, ever travelled so far, so often, and with such range and variety of interesting experience, or such welcomes. He accepted with immense enjoyment the position accorded to him, as of some unofficial ambassador, with an authority and prestige greater than belonged to any official envoy. He was India's High Commissioner to the world at large. He had always been almost uniquely fortunate in his material circumstances: toil and poverty had been things he merely observed in others: and he took this universality of recognition with a royal assumption of it as his due, which occasionally drew a smile from his own countrymen as well as critics in the lands he visited. Yet his dignity throughout, his awareness of the significance of what he was seeing, preserved him from lapses; and he made India respected and regarded as never before, while he himself shook off the last shreds of whatever remained to him of narrow and national prejudices, and almost became the first completely emancipated citizen of the whole world. His criticisms, whether of British or American or Indian habits and actions, were free from the personal and local, and they can be read without resentment—and always with profit—even by those whom they touch most nearly.

In India, he had differed from Gandhi politically but the two men were friends, each recognizing the other's patriotism and integrity. 'To this great soul in a beggar's garb', Tagore paid tribute in a special address at Santiniketan on Mahatmaji's seventieth birthday in 1938. They met from time to time, and on 17th February, 1940, Gandhi and his wife visited the poet and there was a formal reception in the Mango Grove. 'We accept you as our own, as one belonging to all humanity.' Gandhi replied, 'Even though I call this visit a pilgrimage . . . I am no stranger here. I feel as if I had come to my home . . . I have received Gurudev's blessings and my heart is full to the brim with joy.'



In England, after its long eclipse, Tagore's reputation had been steadily returning. More and more it was generally felt that, whatever the real worth of his poetry might ultimately prove to be, in him was a most unusual personality, marked by nobility of thought and attitude. Nobility had been falling out of fashion, and Tagore was essentially noble—not merely in presence, though, as a Western poet once remarked, 'when he came into the room he made us all look almost mean'. He sought for the whole of mankind the highest life and civilization, and combined a puritan austerity of conduct in himself with the widest and most catholic understanding of literature and speculation. The West felt that it could not judge of his work—the poems in translation, at any rate, did not seem to amount to a tremendous deal—but it could feel the greatness of his mind and soul.

There had been in India much misunderstanding, and even resentment, of the fact that the University of Oxford had allowed him to visit it more than once, and in 1930 to deliver the Hibbert Lectures, yet had not made him one of its doctors. The time has come when this can be explained. Because of his return of his knighthood, it was believed that he would refuse any honour from a British source; the University was unwilling to lay itself open to a snub. Nevertheless, Oxford was anxious to offer him a degree, and in 1926 Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate, was asked to sound him privately as to whether he would accept it. Tagore was then in Budapest, and Bridges' letter (of which a copy lies before me) was unfortunately worded. Bridges stated, correctly, that the question of the degree had been discussed informally, but that there must be a formal proposal and the required lapse of time before the vote was taken.

So long as the degree had not been actually approved, it was open to the Hebdomadal Council to reject it at the last moment, and Bridges felt that he could not commit the University, of which he was merely a distinguished private member, further than to ask Tagore if he were coming to England, as there was a proposal to give him an

Oxford degree. He went further than this however, and added 'I think your election is very uncertain'. Tagore not unnaturally took this as a suggestion that he should come to England on the chance of the University offering him a degree, which might make him look foolish if this did not happen, and he replied with some abruptness that it was not convenient for him to come. Oxford's apparent coldness seemed all the greater, by contrast with the warmth and enthusiasm which surrounded him in Budapest. For some years both parties felt the other had been less than courteous. But friends who knew the facts did not let the matter rest, and in 1940 the University, not merely with readiness but with the utmost cordiality, decided to do what it had done only twice before in its long history, and to grant a degree in absence. It deputed Sir Maurice Gwyer and Sir Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan to hold a special Convocation at Santiniketan, where Tagore was made a Doctor of Literature of the University of Oxford. Few events in his life gave him greater pleasure.

In September, Rabindranath left for Kalimpong, where on the 27th, he fell gravely ill. He was brought to Calcutta, and nursed back to some health, so that he could return to Santiniketan. During his convalescence his mind was as active as ever. Two books of verse, *Rogsajjāy* and *Arogya* ('Recovery'), were written now, and during this year he published four other books: two of poems, one of three long short stories, and *Chhelebelā*, delightful reminiscences of his childhood.

During these crowded years, poetry to some extent had subsided into almost a secondary place in his activities. Yet he had never ceased to write it, and to write also many other things, in Bengali and English. He had constantly revised or re-shaped his older dramas, and produced them himself, and he had written new dramas, mainly lyrical in quality and with abundance of music and pageantry. His poems were always accomplished, always perfect in movement, and they exercised a great influence on the new poets of his land. Unlike Tennyson, whom he resembled in the length of his undisputed reign in letters,



Tagore retained his place as the youngest and freshest of his country's writers, and not even the most revolutionary of them ever wavered in his knowledge that this poet was not merely their greatest but their subtlest and most experimenting mind, always the master whose work must be studied. *Puravi*, published in 1926, and *Mahuyā*, 1928, rank with his noblest lyrical writing, and he turned from even these to fresh modes of expression and technique. 'The splendour of *Puravi* and the tenderness of *Mahuyā*', says Buddhadeb Bose, one of the most distinguished and 'realist' of Bengal's younger writers, 'were both achieved between sixty and seventy . . . the most magnificent harvest of songs since the *Gitānjali-Gitimālya-Gitāli* cycle: and in the last ten years he has devised new modes of lyric expression in prose poems and verses. Even in his very latest books of poems there is a shade of feeling, a tone of thought he had not exploited before." If he had written nothing but the poems and fiction of his last two decades, Tagore would have ranked at the head of Bengal's men of letters.

But not even such strength and vigour as his could stay for ever. 1941 was a year of increasing weakness, and of anxiety to his friends. On 14th April, a little before the time, his eightieth birthday was celebrated at Santiniketan, and he marked the occasion by his sombre and powerful, deeply painful, indictment of the modern and especially the Western world, *The Crisis in Civilization*. Almost from his death-bed he voiced his indignation at his country's helplessness and the ignorance and reckless indifference of those who held power. This was hard reading for an Englishman if it were not that some of us knew, not merely what justification underlies the flaming sentences but also that the narrowness which he hated in the West was shrivelling away in the devastation of war, ruthless beyond even the wars that have been.

His birthday was marked by the publication of three more books, one of verse, *Janmadine* ('On My Birthday'),

<sup>1</sup> *Tagore Birthday Number*, 1941, p. 102.

one of short stories, *Galpa-Salpa* ('Tales'), and the English version of *Chhelebelā* (*Boyhood Days*). He could hold a pen no longer and the end was plainly near. He lost consciousness, 5th August; and two days later the news, broadcast by radio and special extra editions of papers, throughout watching and anxious India, spread that he had passed away. The Jorasanko court-yard and the narrow lanes leading to it were packed with sorrowing crowds and an unending file of men and women made their way to the chamber where they took their last glance at the man who, in Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru's words, 'raised the status of Indians in the comity of nations'. All day the pilgrimage continued, and far into the night people of all classes came with gifts of flowers.

The funeral procession started in the afternoon of that day. The poet, in silken saffron robes, was laid on an invalid chair for bier, its sides cut to a design by Nandalal Bose, Santiniketan's artist teacher. Hymns from the *Rigveda* were chanted for his spirit before his body left his home, and Ramananda Chatterjee, the veteran journalist and his old friend, conducted a brief Brahmo service. Flowers and rice and rosewater were sprinkled on the bier as it went by, and long before the procession reached Nimtola burning-ghāt all the approaches were filled. Night had fallen, when at eight-fifteen the poet's grandson, Subirendranath Tagore, began the final rites with the *mukhāgni* (touching fire to the mouth) and the pyre with its incense and sandalwood was lit. Fire, which the poet in a famous song had praised as the friend who would one day take him back to dust again, received him. The cremation ended at midnight.

His only surviving son, Rathindranath, left for Santiniketan with the ashes, and on Sunday the *srāddha*<sup>1</sup> ceremonies took place in this home which the poet had made for the spirit of India. The whole world paid tribute to the greatness whose visible presence had finished, to his majestic person and long life of versatile distinction. Not a man only but an age had made its way at last into

<sup>1</sup> Farewell to a departing spirit.



history. He reached a hand to the Mogul dynasty, of which Rammohan Roy, his father's and grandfather's friend, had been the accredited ambassador in London, and in his poetry and teaching he recalled and equalled the poets and *rishis* of India's antiquity, the Vedic singers and priests, Valmiki and Kalidasa and Kabir and the Vaishnavas. The international recognition of his quality was well mirrored in the commemoration meeting in London, of which I had the honour to be chairman; I shall certainly never again preside over such a platform. Mr Maisky was on my right, the Chinese Ambassador on my left, and they were supported by Dr Negrin, the Dean of Canterbury, E. M. Forster, Kingsley Martin, Surendranath Ganguli, and many others. Helen Kirkpatrick was among the speakers, and Beatrix Lehmann recited from his poems. The question of whether he was a great poet might be undecided, but all knew that he had been an outstanding figure and a very brave and emancipated man. He had summed up in himself a whole age, in which India had moved into the modern world. If I may be permitted one further personal reference, as I said in the broadcast message I was asked to send across the seas, I felt present, not merely at the *srāddha* of my friend and my country's friend, but at the *srāddha* of an epoch.

To the new India that is coming much of his work will make little appeal, it will seem luxurious and lacking in strength and power, much of it enervating and effeminate and trivial after the terrible years through which the nations have lived. Yet it cannot be pushed aside and dismissed, for all his work and life were too closely interwoven with India's own life; it reviews history as well as literature. Tagore sometimes half grudged the destiny which made him a leader. 'I am a poet by temperament, but the star guiding my destiny is extremely practical in its influence and it never really understands me.' It was as a man that he was greatest of all, and in his last two decades rose to symbolic stature. He saw clearly what is now evident

<sup>1</sup> Letter to me, 25th November, 1915.

to everyone, the lack of sympathy between East and West which political conditions had brought about. 'What is radically wrong with our rulers is this : they are fully aware that they do not know us, and yet they do not *care* to know us.' But he did not acquit his own people of blame, for weakness is not reason for pity merely, it is reason for censure. 'Weakness is heinous because it is a menace to the strong and the surest cause of downfall for others. . . . It is a moral duty for every race to cultivate strength, so as to help the world's balance of power to remain even. We are doing England the greatest dis-service possible by making it easy for her to despise us and yet to rule ; to feel very little sympathy for us and yet to judge us.'<sup>2</sup>

His mind and being were rooted in India ; he was at home with the forest sages and the men and women of heroic legend. But his genius was a tree whose branches spread to every land and time, and his catholicity was as great as his courage. In politics, in education, in ethics and social reconstruction, his findings were usually untainted by nationalist prejudice ; his wisdom will be seen ever more clearly as the centuries pass. He died before his country had gained her political freedom. But he himself had found his own freedom long ago.

<sup>1</sup> *Letters to a Friend*, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.



## EPILOGUE

The author of more than eighty distinct works upon so miscellaneous a field, of masses of poetry, lectures, letters as well as substantial treatises, was of necessity rather a stimulus than an authority—an influence rather than a master. As one of his foreign readers has said—his readers are charmed, inspired, more than convinced. He is a moralist, an evangelist—not a philosopher or a man of science. But the union of marvellous literary power, with encyclopedic studies of Nature and Art, both illumined with burning enthusiasm as to all things moral and social, combined to form one of the most fascinating personalities of the nineteenth century.

The man himself issued a mass of biographical matter, full of naïveté, candour, and charm. . . .<sup>1</sup>

THE words are Frederick Harrison's and they are about John Ruskin. I would alter them in some phrases, but there is a sufficient appositeness about them to make Rabindranath's general position clear. He is not merely the lineal descendant of the old Indian *rishis*, as his admirers claim : he was such a typical man of letters, even of miscellaneous letters, although essentially a poet, as we can find among his European contemporaries. Of any voluminous writer's output, a great deal is necessarily provincial in character and appeal ; its final place in the writer's own literature must be left to his own countrymen. But where his work has gone out into the wider world, a foreigner's judgement may be of value ; so, though the main part of what I feel entitled to say has been said incidentally, in my detailed criticism of his books, yet something in the nature of summary is now called for.

Tagore's dramas fall into three main groups : (1) the

<sup>1</sup> *John Ruskin* ('English Men of Letters'), p. 2.

earliest, non-symbolic, of which *Sacrifice* is the best as drama, and *Chitrāngadā* and *Mālini* the loveliest as poetry. All of these, except *Mālini*, are in blank verse; they are of the Shakespearian type, with five acts. (2) The group of short dramas based on Sanskrit (or, in the case of *Sati*, later) heroic story. These are in rhymed couplets and are short. (3) The later dramas, all in prose, which are symbolical. Whatever fire of human interest was present in the earlier plays is fading out; ideas gain the mastery, almost the monopoly, of the poet's stage.

Taking the longer dramas, whether blank verse or prose—that is, groups (1) and (3)—it is to be noted that they do not master form. *Mālini* is almost an exception; and *Chitrāngadā*, as presented in English (but not in Bengali), is quite an exception. The blank verse plays take over the Elizabethan model, especially as we find it in the lesser plays. Hence the multiplicity of scenes, many of them representing no real break or division in the action, the sub-plots, the welter of declamation. The talk distracts attention and sympathy from the characters. From the Elizabethan drama, at first necessarily the only European drama known to him at first-hand, Rabindranath got his rags of convention, rags long gone out of fashion. This makes these earlier dramas seem curiously obsolete, as they did when translated into English.

The prose dramas, though equally weak in construction, except *The Free Current*, have escaped from both Elizabethan and Sanskrit models. It is unfair and unsatisfactory to consider them simply as literature, for they were very much in line with that contemporary movement which strove to make the drama a synthesis of all the arts—pageant and scenery, dancing and costume and music, being as essential as the words. Just as many of Rabindranath's later songs seem nothing on the printed page, but when winged with their own haunting tunes carry the mind far out of itself and float it along rainy dark skies or place it beneath a blazing heaven, on a cracked parched earth that is famishing and craving showers, so many of these pageant-plays, which read more or less



thinly, when seen are a delight which never falters from the first word to the last. Both in the case of his songs and these plays, the poet is entitled to every bit of credit for his many-sided success, for the tune and the song, the play and the pageant, were twin-born, and neither element is more essential than the other. This development of his drama brought his prose plays into line with the most modern drama of the world. It had been an independent development, in the main; but he was well aware of what was happening outside India, and to his mind a hint was more than a full exposition is to most poets.

Bengal has a culture of its own, unique in India; and a Tagore play or pageant was something that you could not see anywhere else in the world. Artists—the best known in India, some of them well known in Europe—had helped in the colour-scheme and grouping; ‘Dinu’ and the poet had trained the choir. The whole was a family festival, full of friendliness as well as beauty. That delightful child of ten, so realistically and cleverly playing the part of the prisoner in *Autumn-Festival*, was the poet’s grandson. The ‘king’, of course, was Gaganendranath, whose black-and-white drawings of cloudy tressed Himalayan forests were as fine as his acting. Thakurdada was either Abanindranath, whose paintings all India knew, or else ‘Dinu’, ‘the treasury of my songs’. The rest were teachers from Santiniketan, the poet’s friends, neighbours, and colleagues of many years. The boys and girls were the children of the school or of the staff, happily growing up together in that place of dreams, with a thousand golden memories linking the years together. Alas that such a vision should perish with this generation or, at best, should have its brightness blurred! Alas that we should have to judge it from the side of literature only, as the botanist looks at the dried heath-flower which once grew where its fellows in myriads stained the hillside and the ferns waved green fronds above the beck!

Taking simply the printed page, then, it is to be noted that in these latest dramas the dramatic fire is dying after

its flashing intensity in *Sati* and *Karna and Kunti*, plays which we have still to consider. Also, he mixed his lasting stuff with whims and fads of his own, streaking everything with a thread of caprice. He did not like this or that class of men—the fact appears repeatedly. He used one theme, one person or set of persons, again and again. I sometimes feel as if he had written only one play since *Karna and Kunti*, as if each successive play were just a redaction of the previous one. This, of course, is by no means the case; but he only once broke ground that was really new, in *The Free Current*.

His own countrymen do not rank Rabindranath's dramas high, which is a reason why a foreigner should be chary of praising them. But, although they are literary dramas, it is not true that they are literary exercises, out of touch with life. His indebtedness to Bengal, to something deeper and truer than books, shows in many qualities of his work, and shows especially in one quality which is very rich in all his poetry, but richest of all in his dramas. Let the reader imagine himself at one of those most characteristic focuses of village-life, the *melās* or religious fairs. The whole countryside has poured out its inhabitants; and still new crowds are making towards the place. There is some religious centre to all this swarm of people; but it is the numerous sideshows that will be remembered longest. Here is a mendicant chanting an episode from the *Rāmāyana*, vernacularized into a toss of rhymes: over there are Vaishnavas improvising a hymn: a countryman goes past you, singing one of Ramprasad's clashing of puns on Kali's names, something that sounds (and is) very like a Bengali version of 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper'. These are Rabindranath's people, and they have a great gift of folk-drama, of ready racy extemporization, of dialogue which comes straight from the road or the bazaar. This gift, a very living one, was his, and came to him directly from his motherland, out of whose soil it seems to spring spontaneously. He has taken the *melā*, the spirit of Bengal, into poetry. It appears more or less mixed in the sub-plots of his earlier plays; but it shows



better in his dialogues, *Hāsyā-Kautuk*,<sup>1</sup> brief scenes translated almost untouched—or so it would seem, though, of course, the poet's art has been skilfully at work—out of life on to the stage. These are easy to act, and are the delight of students. *Vaikuntha's Manuscript* is a longer example of this genre, altogether successful. But this side of his genius reached its highest expression in *The Free Current*. He never gave his dramatic gift development or even a fair chance, and it is in this late drama that control of form is most masterly and the allegory kept in place, as contributory but not ruling and obtrusive, and—best of all—it is the one in which the very breath of his land has found dramatic expression, in the voice of her different classes mingling on the highway.

Both these groups, the earliest plays and the latest, have a great deal of achievement. The earlier group abound in poetry, and in their sub-group, the 'literary' plays—*Chitrāngadā*, *The Curse at Farewell*, and *Mālini*—are noble literature. Dramatic or beautiful passages and phrases are very many—the Sannyasi's lonely passion of anger against the natural world, the last interview between Raghupati and Kshemankar, Debjani's confident and petulant 'Indra is no longer your Indra', her gradual unveiling of the love which she feels that Kach ought himself to unveil for her, Malini's wavering—these are only a few of many fine things. The later plays lay bare a lofty attitude towards life, and reveal a mind moving only on the highest planes of thought and feeling. They have their own ways of stirring emotion, by the friendliness of that simple world which Amal's childish purity and eagerness gathers about him, by the unselfishness of the martyr-prince in *The Free Current*, and by the loyalty of his brother by adoption.

But it is in the short plays of group (2) that Rabindranath showed his highest powers as a dramatist. These swift studies recapture more than verisimilitude, they recapture life itself; and their variety is remarkable.

<sup>1</sup> Untranslatable. Say, 'Laughter and Caprices'.

All that can be said against them is that their stage and cast are restricted and meagre, and their presentation of life fragmentary and detached.

I turn to general consideration of his work. The heaviest count against him, and the objection that has to be faced at the outset, is his monotony. This is partly accounted for by the overwhelming abundance of his work. There are few gaps in his long record of unpausing activity. His mind never lay fallow sufficiently long for a fresh accumulation of thought or experience. The moderate output of a poet like Milton, with many silent intervals, shows a newness with each poem, some definite advance or addition. But with Rabindranath every book slides into the next, all the mental links seem present in the actually written word; the reader is rarely surprised. The change is often so slight that the new book seems repetition of the last one. This fact should in fairness be remembered when we gird against his sameness. There is no sameness, but fine variety, if we take *The Post-Office* and *Chitrāngadā* together, though there is a deadening sameness if we take *The Post-Office* and *Autumn-Festival* and *Phālguni* together. Nevertheless, the monotony is real. So far as I could, I have concealed it for my reader's sake; yet enough has remained for me to feel as if I should be apologetic for a monotony which must have gravely flawed my pages, apart from faults of my own.

Rabindranath rarely rested content with a thing well done once. Such images as that of Earth as a Mother have their pathos frayed by constant recurrence, even though each separate occurrence is in itself touching and beautiful. It may be stated generally that he explores and exploits one emotion far too much, that of mother and son for each other. Nor is this by any means his only offence of the kind. The nuptials of the soul with its ultimate destiny are splendidly envisaged by him, with a wealth of voluptuous lovely detail. But he has done this very often. Many of his Western readers practically ceased their reading of him with his fine translation of Kabir. This



was perhaps because they found in that nobly virile poet, set forth with a greater sincerity than we can achieve today, many of the similes that seemed to be Rabindranath's stock-in-trade. When Kabir hears the drum of his Lord beating to summon him, he writes out of the life of his time, when the vast kettledrums of Chitor announced over echoing leagues the departure and return of the Rajput chieftain, and when the drums beat daily before the fortress-palaces and tents of the Musalman sultans and invaders. But Rabindranath's drums are literary drums, not actual; the simile is one degree removed from life, and is the worse for the removal. Not so with his lamps and flutes, his dances and lotuses, which still exist. But Kabir and the Vaishnavas were before him with these.

A literature must get new thoughts, or stagnate. Unless a fresh stream runs strongly through it, it clogs; and Bengali poetry reminds one too much of those streams which are choked with water-hyacinth—a thick mass of violet bloom—so common a sight in Bengal today. The monotony of English poetry is a monotony of *fashion*. The newness of each generation, the subtle change of attitude, the arresting trick of phrase, very quickly get caught, and grow as stale as anything that they superseded. In English poetry all those lovely words which brought such a breath of freshness—*April, blood, racing, ride*, and a score of others, indicative of youth and eager movement—all the neo-Georgian gift of looking at the familiar world alertly and describing the sight in crisp language—these things soon grew as dull and common as the Victorian over-use of *golden* or of 'the glory of', in the countless phrases modelled on such as Tennyson's:

He reached the glory of a hand ;

or Browning's :

Lord of the ground, a stationed glory there.

But we need not go back beyond our own age. The dogged resolve to be contemporary—always and strictly contemporary—aware of pylons (until they became too

familiar in the landscape) and machinery, interpreting everything in terms of physical and especially political imagery, all these things, which marked the Georgian's successors, was dating even before the second World War ended. There is nothing unprecedented in this; the Elizabethan poet could note of his mistress, that

the Star Chamber of her eyes  
 Robs subjects of their liberties,

as a poet of our time might note that Death was making out his ration cards. Such ephemeral freshness, often immediately effective, soon passes.

But Indian poetry has a monotony of *tradition*. If these words are read by any young Bengali poet who is now where Rabindranath was when he was writing his *Evening Songs*, I would—if I may without offence—urge him to let Radha rest from her agelong journeyings through the pelting nights of *Srāvan*; and beg him to leave Sakuntala to water her flowers immortally in Kalidasa's pages, and nowhere else. Also, let him describe a storm without hearing a thundering chariot drive along the heavenly ways, and without hearing a mighty conch blown or the trumpeting of Indra's elephant. Let him rid his forests once for all of the plaintive pest of cowherds and lost travellers. Above all, let him beware of lotuses. In England we love roses as much as ever, but poets have long ceased to talk about them. All this is an oblique criticism of Rabindranath. But—to finish the counsel, if I may—if after all this, the young poet of our thought turns to Rabindranath, he will find a guide who will show him how to look at the world and to show its beauty with a fidelity and a power of moving emotion that few poets have equalled.

From Rabindranath's abundance it follows almost necessarily that he is a very unequal poet. This has been vehemently disputed by those who know his work far more thoroughly than I do. They have thought that I referred to technique, and have retorted that he is a far less unequal poet than Wordsworth or Browning; that he is not unequal at all, but that even his early work, even that



which he has prodigally thrown away is well written. All this is true ; he hardly ever writes incompetently, in this resembling an English poet for whom he had no great liking, Tennyson. Perhaps no poet of anything approaching his abundance has his consistency of technical excellence. This, also, has a debit side. English, if one avoids, as good poets do, coupling words ending in *-ee* and *-y*, *flower* and *bower*, *day* and *say*, *love* and *grove*, is a difficult language for rhyming. But Bengali is extraordinarily easy ; it is fuller of rhyme-sounds than even Italian. Words can often be lengthened or shortened, and the same sound can be used as a rhyme if the meaning be different. There is also a lazy toleration of the rhyming of such correlatives as English has in *when* and *then*. Rabindranath increased this ease of verse, by popularizing his freer prosody, for the old stereotyped metres. Further, the metres in common use are childishly easy jingles ; in every college are fifty students who can produce a passable set of verses in half-an-hour, for a professor's farewell. When one adds that there is a stock of established metaphors and phrases, it will be seen that a poet has a very clear road before him, if he seeks simply technical impeccability. Bengali poets must be on their guard against this ensnaring ease of versing a hundredfold more than they have been. The day is coming when a vast proportion of the poetry already written will fall as low in reputation with Bengalis as our eighteenth century's enormous output of correctly rhymed couplet poems has long ago fallen with English readers ; and a great access of strength is waiting for the poet who stiffens his technique habitually, and not simply in his giant moods. Having said all this, I would add emphatically that Rabindranath used this dangerous freedom like a master, bent it deliberately into difficult ways and experimented endlessly, and added more new stanza-forms than all the other Bengali poets put together ; and that his extensive use of the *hasanta* not simply increased the metrist's resources on the side of ease, but jagged and broke the verse's smooth flow.

His inequality is in his thought and matter. Truth of

matter is essential to truth of style ; and the trivial and the whimsical do not furnish the stuff of greatness. For instance, as I have tried to show, supreme drama is not written on a theme hastily improvized from a poet's fads or likings, his preference for a free open-air life or his dislike of officials or machinery. Rabindranath has come far closer to the highest drama when he has taken his theme from ancient legend finding such a story as that of Chitrangada or of Karna and Kunti ready to his hand, itself grandly sufficient without any eking out with personal idiosyncrasies.

Another fault keeps much of his most carefully wrought work out of the court of the greatest poetry. There are not inconsiderable tracts of his early poetry where I think the reader's imagination, when working at its loftiest, will be repelled. I am judging by the noblest standards that time has given us, so that this implies comparative rather than absolute condemnation. I think of that unseen god calling the delaying Oedipus ; or of *King Lear* ; or of Milton's

Nature within me seems  
In all her functions weary of herself,  
My race of glory done and race of shame,  
And I shall shortly be with them that rest.

Or, taking Rabindranath's own best work, I think of *Karna and Kunti* or (on a lower, but still lofty level) the ardours of *Urvashi*, ' a naked beauty adored by the King of the Gods '. If we remember such poetry, there is felt to be more than a breath of miasma about all his zenana imagery, and his endless references to the first night of nuptials. I do not care how spiritualized they are, whether they refer to the soul's union with its own *jibandebatā* or with God himself, they cannot stand in the presence of the highest poetry, but wither like the hothouse stuff that they are. It is because of the prevalence of all this marriage-chamber obsession that *The Golden Boat*, a book that is crammed with beautiful and accomplished poetry, so that to many Bengalis it is his highest lyrical achievement, is to me a book from which I am glad to escape, into

An ampler ether, a diviner air.



There is yet another gravest fault of all. With all his busyness, all the glancing curiosity of his mind, there went a certain mental laziness, except when deep feeling roused him. If we refuse to allow ourselves to be satisfied with the rich and often wonderful beauty of his work, declining to sink back on pillows of such variegated softness, asking instead what is its value for the mind and spirit of man, we often feel there is a slackness somewhere, probably at the very springs of thought and conception. His poems rarely fail in beauty of style; but they often fail in grip. This is the special failure of *Chitrā*, so fine lyrically. Many of its poems trail, spreading the central conception loosely. He often does not keep control of his mental processes, but lets the thought slide whither it will, prolixly. We have seen how he stops short of dramatic success, when it was within his grasp, in *Mālini* and elsewhere—stops short because of some lack of power or willingness to concentrate and to stake all on the last throw. He plays too much with externals, with ornamentation. The worst flaw of his later work is this lack of serious intellectual effort. His mastery of expression had long been consummate and his metrical accomplishment impeccable. But, more and more, he embroidered the margins of truth, treating it as a missal to be illuminated. Yet *Balākā*, *Palātakā*, *Lipikā*, *Puravi*, and *Mahuyā*, all books of his last twenty-five years, showed how amazingly varied, as well as superbly easy, was his workmanship, nor was it inadequately sustained by imagination and thought.

Leaving empty and false pieces aside—their number is not great comparatively, it is their existence at all in the work of maturity that is significant—there is an enormous body of beautiful work by Rabindranath, probably a larger body of really beautiful work than any other poet can show. It will never cease to delight, and it will keep his name honoured. Nevertheless, I find it hard to persuade myself that work which so rests in secondary details, and is so occupied with beauty of ornament, rises into the extremely small class of first-rate poetry, except rarely. If it does so at all, Rabindranath's claim to the title of great poet is

secure ; if it does not do it often, that means only that he is not a Shakespeare or a Sophocles or a Dante. He may well be a Hugo or a Wordsworth, or greater than either. I have spoken freely of his faults, but I am well aware that they are shared by English poets, that his prolixity is matched by Browning and Wordsworth and his repetitions by Swinburne, that his tricks and his over-cult of descriptive poetry are faults of living poets whom any intelligent reader can name. Shelley's *snakes* and *boats* and *worms* and *corpses* are as plentiful as Rabindranath's *flutes* and *lamps* and *flowers*, and he has a similar run on certain adjectives. Further, Rabindranath's stereotyped technical perfection has been anticipated in the vast mass of Tennyson's later work, while the former always kept a suppleness and lyrical quality that are not present in the English poet's dramatic work and the poorer *Idylls of the King*.

And I think I understand how his Bengali admirers can make the claim they do. We estimate a poet's work absolutely, but his genius relatively. When a country has produced not a few writers of poetical genius, as Bengal has, and yet one of them towers immeasurably above the rest, dwarfing every other figure, that writer clearly has a very exceptional mind, which enables him to rise superior to circumstances which hampered other fine minds. In my smaller book, I have pointed out how Rabindranath overcame a narrowness of thought inherent in the conditions of life in Bengal, and became a universal poet. But he had other disadvantages, less obvious but no less real. Not only were life and thought circumscribed in his land, but his genius was left without guidance, a grave loss to so industrious and eager a reader. There was no literary criticism in Bengal. Politics overshadowed all thought, and the national sensitiveness was so quick that a book was judged, not by its honesty or ability, not by the insight it showed or the help it brought, but solely according as it flattered patriotic vanity. Consequently, literary criticism was either carping, a meticulous examination of a book sentence by sentence, or else spade-fuls of ecstatic praise. Individual Bengalis showed great fairness and



breadth of mind, but this had not found its way into Bengali criticism. But (it may be said) Rabindranath had another modern literature to help him. Obviously, this might to some extent correct the pooriness of Bengali critical standards.

Contact with highly developed foreign models may warp or cramp a literature in its infancy, but cannot harm it when full-grown and robust. The native character is then too firmly established to be corrupted, and it is pure gain to have another standard for comparison, for detection of weaknesses and their cure.<sup>1</sup>

England and India have been so closely linked that, even if the political tie goes, their literatures are bound to be closer together than any other two literatures of Europe and Asia. A Bengali poet is bound to find in English his main channel of communication with that wider world into which it must increasingly be the ambition of every poet that his craft should sail. English literature served Rabindranath well in many ways. It served him well metrically, showing him how to pass from melody to rich interwoven harmonies, doing for Bengali verse through him what European music may yet do for Indian music. But it also served him badly. He was influenced chiefly by just those of our poets who could help him least to castigate his own faults. Keats would be an exception to this statement, if it were not that in the Keats of *Endymion* there is only too much that is like the weaker Rabindranath. And at first it was the poorer Shelley that ruled him; the Shelley of the *West Wind* was a later influence. Milton, the English poet who could have helped him most to brevity and compression, he hardly studied, if at all, and distrusted, if he did not dislike. So Rabindranath took over from English poetry surface qualities, metrical nuances, and a closer way of natural description.

Further, it was his misfortune that the European language which he knew best, English, was not the richest in criticism. It had excellent criticism, of course, long

<sup>1</sup> R. W. Livingstone (*The Legacy of Greece*, p. 286).

before he was born ; but it was in scattered pockets, not in reefs, and a foreigner would hardly come across it.

So much for what I feel to be his faults. The other side of the account awaits presentation. I hope it has been abundantly laid open in the detailed examination of the poet's many books, and that the reader is no longer in need of conviction. The first thing he will have noticed is that, when he escapes from the nuptial-chamber imagery, Rabindranath is the most open-air of poets. What I have said of the lack of variety in his work needs, on the side of natural description, a qualification and an explanation. Bengali seasons and landscape have not the variety of English. This jack-tree before my veranda will look next October and next March as it looks now, in July. Even the coming of the rains does not bring any rush of flowers. In the jungle the *kurchi* blossoms, and a few small and insignificant ground-plants ; and a scurf of grass appears. In the Ganges Valley, the change is even less, as there is at all times a good deal of lush grass along and beside the waterways and tanks. English poets, with the infinite variety of change from month to month, have learnt the intimate lineaments of their mother and have made their verse glancing and varied. But a Bengali poet would not have the material to write such a piece as

There is a hill beside the silver Thames ;<sup>1</sup>

the nearest his landscape will allow him to get is in such a poem as *Noon*,<sup>2</sup> which I have translated earlier in this book. This lack of variety is the reason why the Indian countryside does not speak to English minds, especially poetic minds ; no Englishman has written first-class poetry about India. But Indian landscape has its own equal way of excellence, and speaks to Indian minds. It gave Rabindranath the widest horizons of spreading river and stretching plain, and filled his verse with air and space. Just as life in India is more open-air than in England, so poetry also, when not a mere literary exercise, is more open-air. It has nothing of the fireside, but much of the road. And

<sup>1</sup> Robert Bridges.

<sup>2</sup> Page 134.



Rabindranath has been the most filial of all Bengal's sons, the one who has drawn most from companionship with his mother. Her villages, her streams, her bazaars and *melās*, the moon floating superbly over her mango-groves, the whiteness gathering in her evening skies—these have found perfect expression in his verse, and have made him so supreme a landscape poet in the large effects that the lesser subtleties of flower and bird are hardly missed. In atmosphere and general effects he is scarcely rivalled.

Translation that can convey the depth and colour of his verse, and its glow of imaginative interpretation of the natural world—what used to be styled 'glamour', before that word was appropriated for the world of film stars and seaside 'beauty shows', and ruined for ever—is hardly possible. Even Indian readers, unless they know Bengali, miss Rabindranath's quality. Rabindranath, says Professor Radhakrishnan, for example, 'does not love beauty for its own sake, but because he views it as an attribute of the divine'. This is quite mistaken; no poet ever had a more intimate feeling for natural beauty. It should have been easy, even in translation, to show this. The Western reader, tired of Oriental obsession with maternity (as in Italian art galleries one wearies of Madonnas and Holy Families), may not care for an image so characteristically Indian as this, from *Sonār Tari* :

The clouds,  
Like children suckled at the mother's breast,  
Cling to the peaks,

yet it is what you see in the depths of some forest, the clouds at rest by, yet slightly apart from, a cornice of rock. But touches which are equally true in East and West abound in his work :

Sitting abstracted and alone today  
On Padma's brink, letting these eyes not stray  
To left or right, in all my limbs I know,  
With all my mind I feel, thy grasses grow  
Tremblingly on thy body.

*The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore, p. 142.*

The moon seems far away—  
 Like a tired traveller as he makes his way,  
 Slowly, how slowly, up the empty sand  
 Heaped at the river's edge.

Or this, from *Kathā* :

. . . the red burning light of fading day,  
 Flinging long shadows, like a bat's broad wings,  
 Was flying westward through the silent sky.

Or, from the same poem, an image of the close friendship  
 between an aged teacher and his young disciple :

And, as some thunder-blasted banyan's heart  
 From the light winds a wandering seed receives,  
 Which waxes great, till with vast boughs and leaves  
 It covers up the aged tree from sight.

Or this, a picture of darkness in arctic solitudes :

Night comes, where there is none to sleep,  
 And, like a mother that doth vigil keep  
 With eyes undrowsing, by the empty bed  
 Of her dead son, unwinking overhead  
 Sits in the endless sky.

But his achievement goes further than this. Buddhadeb Bose claims<sup>1</sup> that he is the world's greatest lyric poet; and, though on his translations I know it sounds absurd to agree with this, yet, when I remember his unrivalled variety of lyric measures, his unfailing certainty of touch, the gaiety and liveliness as well as gravity which were at his command, his power of noble thought and emotion, joined to this luxuriance of imagery which varies despite its sameness—as the natural world also varies amid repetition—I am disposed to believe it.

His countrymen find his greatest gifts to be this interpretation of nature and his interpretation of sorrow. It is the former that is to be the more unhesitatingly accepted.

<sup>1</sup> *Tagore Birthday Number*, p. 103.



I believe it to be his greatest quality, and the quality in which no other poet surpasses him. It goes very much deeper than the fresh open-air quality of which I have been speaking, his gift of landscape. He has put his heart so close to the world about him, that his sympathy seems to pass into its body, returning thence charged with a knowledge and subtle understanding that make his language haunted. Looking into Nature's face, he remembers; once the dust that is now his limbs was dust that grew her rice and banyans, or was rocked in the sway and toss of her surges. This is what makes the appeal of such poems as *Abalyā*, or *I Will Not Let You Go*, or *Beside the Sea*. It is the gift to him of that agelong Indian belief in many incarnations. But it was developed by those days and weeks of continuous living on the water. It is in water that new forms of life are continually and obviously coming into being; and the man who is familiar with that shifting endlessly-peopled element is in the very flux of existence, the workshop of creation.

In the later poems which all the world knows, love and intimate knowledge of nature have passed into religious experience. His work is singularly rich in intuition, the subtlety of his observation often going to the heart of a matter. This perception of what is the very core and reason of things led him in his best work away from the surface beauty. It was Shelley's search for a hidden loveliness that made the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* a swaying influence on Rabindranath's imagination, during many years when he was feeling his way towards a definite experience of realized beauty within his life. The influence of at least one of Keats's poems has been more abiding still. 'I like the *Grecian Urn* very much. The idea appeals to me, that a thing which is beautiful gives you the touch of the infinite—"teases out of thought". The quality of the infinite is not in extension but in perfection. The unity gives you the idea, and distracts your attention—teases you.'<sup>1</sup> This 'teasing' kept him from acquiescence

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

in the comparatively easily captured loveliness of the visible world.

If I do not write at length about his religious poetry, it is not because I do not feel its beauty and value, but because religious poetry, even more than other poetry, requires sifting by men's experience. In the writing of every fine religious poet, there is a great deal which, though deeply felt by him, is by a later generation felt to be of personal and not universal significance—this or that strain is Anglican or Catholic, Vaishnava or Brahmo, Moslem or Vedantist. Hence the 'smell of stale incense' which one critic has found in Francis Thompson's religious poetry; or the malarial eroticism which I think poisons Indian religious poetry. But these complaints do not lie against 'O world invisible, we view thee' or 'Thou hast made me endless, such is Thy pleasure'.<sup>1</sup> This deepest truest experience will be proved anew in the experience of each succeeding generation; and as long as man is religious it will stand, whatever creed be held by religious men. This personal experience of religion, and the poise and peace that came when he saw his life to be unified so, to be the work of a greater than any *jibandebatā* watching over his years, set Rabindranath apart among poets—they were his own experience, not resembling that of any other great poet—and must finally be a chief factor in determining his place among the world's poets.

On the other claim which Bengalis make, I am less convinced. The sorrow which his verse has so movingly expressed is his from his own people, a folk to whom fate has not been kind. There is an undertone of sorrow present almost everywhere in his verse, often wailingly present. There was such a wistfulness moving everywhere upon the face of our modern thought, that many felt that the Indian poet expressed their inner selves, their sorrow and disillusion, opening out as well a way to some deep peace which they have not found.

He has more than this, however. He has power of

<sup>1</sup> *Gītīmālya*; (E.) *Gitanjali*, 1.



setting forth final and irremediable tragedy, the anguish that is implicit in a situation, movingly set forth in isolation. There is the Rajput girl-bride, arriving to find her betrothed dead, the flaring torches and the darkness throwing a sombre shadow over the spirit as we read. We see her sitting statuelike, as her awful death begins, the shouts ringing over the gloomy cremation-ground. There is the maddened mother opening her eyes to look for the child she has laid on the river-*ghāt*. But, if a man is to find place among the supreme poets, we ask more still. He must have the power of packing the pathos of a scene into a phrase, even a word; this Rabindranath does not lack. But, far more, the poet must be able to make a phrase or a word the revelation of a human spirit, of the agony within; and I think Rabindranath achieves this also. When Karna calls Kunti 'the mother of Arjuna', nothing of that phrase's stabbing force and poignancy is lost by the allusive manner of its use; then, indeed, must she have realized that her errand was vain, with that gulf between her and her deserted son laid bare by the lightning of a word. More pity-stirring still, almost, is that tense moment when his mother's dumb anguish pierces the night's black silence, touching Karna 'in all my limbs'. Or who can forget Ama's cry of 'Father', when the soldiers leap forward to seize her for the pyre? The world has very little poetry of this pitch of intensity or power of revelation, just as, though it has much more, it still has not very much lyrical poetry as great as the best poems of *Balākā*. The reader may have been so concerned with my qualifications of the poet's genius that he may miss how tremendous is the claim made now. If Rabindranath ever succeeds in this lightning laying bare of the inmost mind of distress, then he is a great poet indeed; and I think he does succeed.

He is strong in abstract ideas, as we should expect in an Indian. These glimmer through early lyric and later drama alike. But his thought is strangely concrete, easy for a Westerner to follow, perhaps because his mind has not taken a metaphysical turn. This makes the finding

of resemblances to Western poets attractive and easy. But (to take an example) when his resemblance to Tennyson has been noted—his interest in scientific speculation and discovery, his vast preponderance of decorative work, the long and steady exercise of his poetical faculties—we note the difference—his many-sided touch with active life, the freedom of his mysticism, at any rate in its later expressions, from any speculative elements such as we find in *Vastness*, his power of being aloofly intellectual and lonely. Similarly, when he is put side by side with Victor Hugo, and we note the volume and formal variety of the work of both writers and their political energy, and note also how very much of their work is on a lofty but still definitely secondary plane, rhetorical or descriptive or didactic, there remain differences, of subtler thought in the Indian, of more constant fire in the Frenchman.

To sum up, he faced both East and West, filial to both, deeply indebted to both. His personality hereafter will attract hardly less attention than his poetry, so strangely previous a figure must he seem, when posterity sees him. He has been both of his nation, and not of it; his genius has been born of Indian thought, not of poets and philosophers alone but of the common people, yet it has been fostered by Western thought and by English literature; he has been the mightiest of national voices, yet has stood aside from his own folk in more than one angry controversy. His poetry presents the most varied in the history of Indian achievement.

Leaving aside the half-dozen greatest names, we may take any poet we choose and set out his masterpieces; and from what Rabindranath has already done we can set beside them *Chitrāṅgadā* and *The Curse at Farewell*, *Urvashi* and *The Farewell to Heaven*, *Ahalyā*, *The Cloud-Messenger*, *Evening*, *Moonlight*, *Sea-Waves* and the great land-storms of *Kalpanā*, *Sati*, *Gāndhārī's Prayer*, *Karna* and *Kuntī*, the opening hell-scene of *Narak-Bās*, the grim narratives of *Kathā*, the quieter beauty of the stories of *Palātakā*, the great odes of *Balākā*, the poems of *Gīpikā* and *Puravi* and *Mabuyā* and scores of dancing songs of



every period of his half-century of incessant activity. The assessment of final values cannot be done in this generation; but already it is clear that his ultimate place will be not simply among India's poets, but among those of the world.

## APPENDIX A

### RABINDRANATH'S KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH POETRY

His reading of English poetry was mostly done in youth and early manhood. He read it little in later life, being anxious to get into wider currents still, those of European literature; and our poets did not attract him.

These new poets of yours speak a new language, and after Keats and Shelley I cannot understand them. I can understand Blunt and Davies and de la Mare, that is about all.<sup>1</sup>

His mind had many affinities with the European mind; when explaining Bengali poetry, he was always quick to bring out at once the points that would seem important to an Englishman. His reading in English poetry, though casual, was very wide. First-hand knowledge of Browning came late, and even then, I suspect, was confined to the short pieces. Browning's influence was considerable, as we have seen, during his most prolific period: but it came from Loken Palit's enthusiasm. Poets have often shown that second-hand influence can be very effective. He read and liked some Shakespeare. When a boy he had a tutor who used to punish him by locking him up till he had translated a passage of poetry; in this way, he translated both Kalidasa's *Birth of the War-God* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*! Various other plays of Shakespeare's have been mentioned in this book, as known to him. To these can be added *Othello*, which he found 'harrowing', too painful to read. Scott's *Kenilworth*, similarly, 'I cannot read twice'.<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth he liked—not enthusiastically, I imagine. He admired the finish of *Sobrab and Rustum*. But his deepest admirations were for Shelley and Keats, among English poets.

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> Conversation.



That he did an immense deal of desultory reading in English his remarkable conquest of the language witnesses. That conquest in some ways was more apparent in his lectures than in his translations. In his last ten years he came back to English poetry. For example, he translated admirably T. S. Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi*. 'In my lectures I took more liberties. I felt I had my audiences with me, and that encouraged me.' Certainly, they are eloquent speaking and writing; the substance is from Bengali articles written during more than a generation of constant work, but they have new wings of their own. But for real beauty and achievement in English nothing in his lectures attains the level of *Gitanjali* and *Chitra*. Those two first of his translations seem to me perfect in poise and loveliness, on a level which only the translation of *Karna and Kunti* reaches among his later translations, most of which are more or less careless and casual.<sup>2</sup>

Indian influences, of course, were the deepest and touched his mind far more constantly than any European ones, and at a thousand points. It is the custom in Bengal to call him a disciple of the Vaishnava poets—which is as if we called Milton a disciple of Sylvester or Du Bartas. 'The influence of the Vaishnavas is more apparent', says Mr Mahalanobis, 'since it is an influence on the form, while Kalidasa's is one on the spirit of his poetry—but the influence of the latter is far deeper.' Rabindranath himself said: 'I am well aware of Kalidasa's limitations. But he is much the greatest of the old Sanskrit poets.' It was from Kalidasa that Rabindranath's early work inherited a tradition of elaboration to which it is hard for the Western critic to do justice, it is so alien from our recognized ways of excellence. Yet no competent judge of poetry could read the Sanskrit text of the *Meghaduta*, without perception of the beauty of its similes as well as of the extraordinary skill with which each is followed out into every possible ramification. And there are many poems in *The Golden Boat* and *Chitrā*, in reading which

<sup>1</sup> Conversation.

<sup>2</sup> See my *Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 45 and 49-51.

the critic should be on his guard against his natural exasperation ; and though he may decide, as Rabindranath's own later judgement apparently did, that selection and simplicity are preferable to elaboration, yet he should see how good the poems are in their own fashion.

That Rabindranath owed much to other Bengali or Indian poets, other than the earliest Sanskrit non-dramatic poets and the folk-poets of Bengal (among whom I include Ramprasad), I do not believe. His elder brother Dwijendranath's poetry influenced his early work strongly ; and from folk-poetry the tradition of the *baul* poets, religious mendicants, often unlettered, is one which he has specially carried into his own poetry, where it is perhaps the most vernacular strain—a note often of piercing, poignant sweetness, as the poet's soul calls on God.

But his Bengali critics went much too far when they asserted that Rabindranath's style and manner were exotic. One of these, a distinguished scholar, wrote to me :

He was born in Bengal, but in a Europeanized atmosphere, in which there was hardly any indigenous element, except, perhaps, a culture of the *Upanishads*. His mode of thinking is so essentially English that I appreciate his English translation of the *Gītānjali* far better than the original Bengali. Owing to his poetry being thoroughly imbued with Western ideas, he appeals to his English readers more widely than to Bengalis. Amongst us, those only who have lost all touch with the old vernacular literature and with the life of the people, reading only European books, are his admirers. The rest are bewildered by his Bengali style, to which they are not accustomed and which, when rendered in English, appears happier and more natural. The much-admired mysticism of his poems is but a feeble echo of the message that the *Upanishads* have brought to us. His love poems have only fleeting emotions, and leave hardly any impression after one reading. If our country loses herself headlong in the sea of foreign culture, he will no doubt be the harbinger of the new literary age. But if otherwise, I am sure his fame will fade and in the annals of our literature he will be remembered only as the head of a school that drew its inspiration from foreign sources. European appreciation does not weigh much with us, it only shows that he has acquired the poetical knack of saying things in such a way as will readily appeal to the European mind.



There speaks the voice of honest and able conservatism, which it is always good to hear. The same critic adds :

Bengal has not given Rabindranath to Europe—rather Europe has given him to the Bengalis. By praising him, European scholars praise their own gift. I would feel more proud and happy if our own poets had received such fame in foreign countries.

It is necessary for the outer world, trying to find what Rabindranath represents and where he stands, to know that such things were said by, at any rate, a minority of his own countrymen. In the rest of this book, all written before this letter reached me, I have indicated what seems to me the vernacular, and what the foreign, elements in his poetry and genius. He borrowed very largely, as Virgil and Dante and Chaucer and Milton did, and it is part of his greatness that he has done so. When the grass is growing over my conservative friend and myself, it will be seen (I believe) that Rabindranath saved Bengali poetry, choked in its own tangles and convolutions, and enabled it to flower in sunlight and a sweeter air, beside that highway which is the whole world's way.

## APPENDIX B

### COMPARISON OF ENGLISH AND BENGALI BOOKS

I THOUGHT at first of indicating the Bengali book from which each poem in his English books was taken ; but that would be of little value, except to Bengalis. Instead, I give general results ; they do not quite cover the books—owing to the poet's freedom in translating, sources are often elusive.

GITANJALI : *Gitānjali* 51, *Gitimālya* 17, *Naivedya* 16, *Khayā* 11, *Sisu* 3, *Chaitāli*, *Smaran*, *Kalpanā*, *Utsarga*, *Achalāyatan* 1 each.

THE GARDENER : *Kshanikā* 25, *Kalpanā* 16, *Sonār Tari* 9, *Chaitāli* and *Utsarga* 6 each, *Chitrā* 5, *Mānasi* and *Māyār Khelā* 3 each, *Khayā* 2, *Kari o Komal*, *Gitāli*, and *Sāradsab* 1 each.

THE CRESCENT MOON : All but half-a-dozen from *Sisu* ; *Kari o Komal* 4, *Sonār Tari* and *Gitimālya* 1 each.

FRUIT-GATHERING : *Gitāli* 16, *Gitimālya* 15, *Balākā* 14, *Utsarga* 8, *Kathā* 6, *Khayā* and *Smaran* 5 each, *Chitrā* and *Naivedya* 2 each, *Kalpanā*, *Gitānjali*, *Rājā*, *Mānasi*, *Kari o Komal*, *Achalāyatan* 1 each ; 3 are *Dharmasangit* (Hymns).

LOVER'S GIFT AND CROSSING : *Balākā* and *Kshanikā* 14 each, *Khayā* 10, *Gitānjali* and *Gitimālya* 8 each, *Naivedya* and *Utsarga* 7 each, *Chitrā* 5, *Smaran*, *Gitāli*, *Chaitāli*, *Kalpanā* 4 each, *Achalāyatan* 3, *Mānasi* and *Prāyaschitta* 2 each, *Kari o Komal* and *Kāhini* 1 each ; at least 9 are *Dharmasangit*.

THE FUGITIVE : *Lipikā* at least 20, *Mānasi*, *Sonār Tari* and *Chaitāli* 7 each, *Chitrā* 5, *Kshanikā*, *Kāhini* and *Palātakā* 4 each, *Utsarga* and *Balākā* 3 each, *Kari o Komal* and *Smaran* 2 each, *Khayā*, *Gitimālya*, *Kathā*, *Vidāya-Abhisāp* 1 each.



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